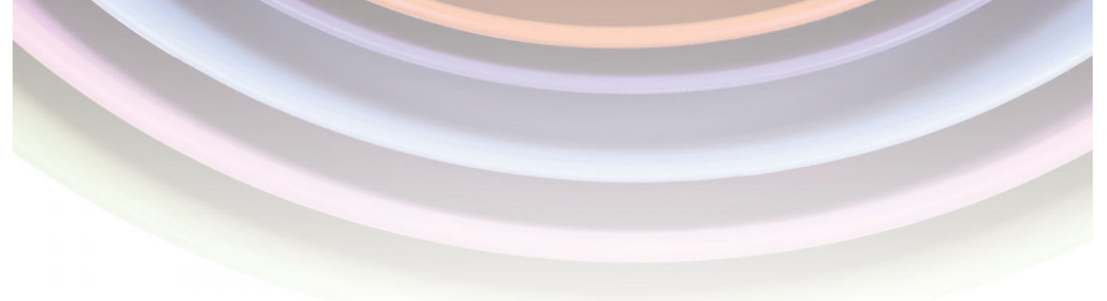




Part Three

Part Three of this book is concerned with qualitative research. Chapter 17 sets the scene by exploring the main features of this research strategy. Chapter 18 explores the distinctive approach that qualitative researchers take towards sampling. Chapter 19 deals with ethnography and participant observation, which are among the main ways of collecting qualitative data. Chapter 20 is concerned with the kind of interviewing that is carried out in qualitative research. Chapter 21 addresses the focus group method, which is an increasingly popular technique that allows groups of people to be interviewed. Chapter 22 explores two approaches to the study of language in social research: conversation analysis and discourse analysis. Chapter 23 explores the types of documents with which qualitative researchers tend to be concerned and approaches to examining them. Chapter 24 examines different approaches to qualitative data analysis and offers advice on how it can be carried out. Chapter 25 shows you how to use computer software in the form of NVivo to conduct the kind of analysis discussed in Chapter 24.

These chapters will provide you with the essential tools for doing qualitative research. They will take you from the very general issues to do with the generic features of qualitative research to the very practical issues of conducting your own observational studies or interviews and analysing your own data.

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17

The nature of qualitative research

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Chapter guide

Qualitative research is a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. As a research strategy it is broadly inductivist, constructionist, and interpretivist, but qualitative researchers do not always subscribe to all three of these features. This chapter is concerned with outlining the main features of qualitative research, which has become an increasingly popular approach to social research. The chapter explores:

- the main steps in qualitative research; delineating the sequence of stages in qualitative research is more controversial than with quantitative research, because it exhibits somewhat less codification of the research process;
- the relationship between theory and research;
- the nature of concepts in qualitative research and their differences from concepts in quantitative research;
- how far reliability and validity are appropriate criteria for qualitative researchers and whether alternative criteria that are more tailored to the research strategy are necessary;
- the main preoccupations of qualitative researchers; five areas are identified in terms of an emphasis on: seeing through the eyes of research participants; description and context; process; flexibility and lack of structure; and concepts and theory as outcomes of the research process;
- some common criticisms of qualitative research;
- the main contrasts between qualitative and quantitative research;
- the stance of feminist researchers on qualitative research.

Introduction

I began Chapter 7 by noting that *quantitative* research had been outlined in Chapter 2 as a distinctive research strategy. Much the same kind of general point can be registered in relation to *qualitative* research. In Chapter 2 it was suggested that qualitative research differs from quantitative research in several ways. Most obviously, qualitative research tends to be concerned with words rather than numbers, but three further features were particularly noteworthy:

1. an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research, whereby the former is generated out of the latter (though see the section below on **abduction** as a qualification of this view);
2. an epistemological position described as interpretivist, meaning that, in contrast to the adoption of a natural scientific model in quantitative research, the stress is on the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants; and
3. an ontological position described as constructionist, which implies that social properties are outcomes of the interactions between individuals, rather than phenomena ‘out there’ and separate from those involved in its construction.

As Bryman and Burgess (1999) observe, although there has been a proliferation of writings on qualitative research since the 1970s, stipulating what it is and is not as a distinct research strategy is by no means straightforward. They propose three reasons for this state of affairs.

1. As a term ‘qualitative research’ is sometimes taken to imply an approach to social research in which quantitative data are not collected or generated. Many writers on qualitative research are critical of such a rendition of qualitative research, because (as we will see) the distinctiveness of qualitative research does not reside solely in the absence of numbers.
2. Qualitative research has comprised different traditions and stances over the years (see Thinking deeply 17.1).

Moreover, research is still conducted and published that fits well with the earliest of the stages identified by Denzin and Lincoln (2005b) in *Thinking deeply* 17.1. For example, Venkatesh's (2008) popular ethnography of drugs gangs in Chicago, while displaying some characteristics of experimental writing (Stage 5), has many of the features associated with the first two stages.

3. Sometimes, qualitative research is discussed in terms of the ways in which it differs from quantitative research. A potential problem with this tactic is that it means that qualitative research ends up being addressed in terms of what quantitative research is *not*.

Silverman (1993) has been particularly critical of accounts of qualitative research that do not acknowledge the variety of forms that the research strategy can assume. In other words, writers like Silverman are critical of attempts to specify the nature of qualitative research as a general approach (see also *Thinking deeply* 17.1).

However, unless we can talk to a certain degree about the nature of qualitative research, it is difficult to see how it is possible to refer to qualitative research as a distinctive research strategy. In much the same way that in Chapter 7 it was recognized that quantitative researchers employ different research designs, in writing about the characteristics of qualitative research we will need to be sensitive to the different orientations of qualitative researchers. Without at least a sense of what is common to a set of many if not most studies that might be described as qualitative, the very notion of qualitative research would be rendered problematic. Yet it is clear that, for many social scientists, it is a helpful and meaningful category that can be seen in a variety of ways. Examples are: the arrival of specialist journals, such as *Qualitative Sociology*, *Qualitative Research*, *Ethnography*, and *Qualitative Inquiry*; texts on qualitative research (e.g. Seale 1999; Silverman 2010); a *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, 2000, 2005a); and a series of books on different facets of qualitative research (the Sage Qualitative Research Methods Series).



Thinking deeply 17.1

The Nine Moments of Qualitative Research

Denzin and Lincoln (2005b) have suggested that qualitative research has progressed through a number of stages. They portray this as a history of qualitative research in North America. It is not clear why the stages are presented as relating only to North America, but the distinctions are worth drawing attention to because they relate closely to the suggestion that there are different traditions of qualitative research.

1. *The traditional period.* The early twentieth century up to the Second World War. This phase refers to the work of social anthropologists and the Chicago School. It refers to in-depth studies of 'slices of life' that portrayed those who were studied as strange or alien. It was heavily imbued with positivism.
2. *Modernist phase.* Post-Second World War to early 1970s. During this period, qualitative researchers built on the work of the traditional period but at the same time sought to enhance the rigour of qualitative enquiries and began to reflect on the nature of their craft. These investigations also showed a tendency towards positivism.
3. *Blurred genres.* 1970–86. This was a period when a variety of epistemological and ontological approaches, as well as theoretical ideas, were being explored as plausible bases for qualitative enquiries. According to Denzin and Lincoln, we see in this period a continued proclivity towards positivism, but with the beginnings of an interpretivist self-consciousness, influenced by Geertz's (1973a) insistence that qualitative researchers are involved in interpretations of the interpretations of those on whom they conduct their investigations.
4. *Crisis of representation.* Mid-1980s onwards. Most of the key writings associated with this moment occurred in the 1980s. It refers to a period in which qualitative social researchers in general (though much of the writing stemmed initially from social anthropology) developed greater self-awareness concerning in particular the fact that their accounts of their fieldwork are just one way of representing reality and that, moreover, their representations are heavily influenced by their social locations. The 'crisis of representation' then is the recognition that the researcher's written work has limited scientific authority. These ideas will be encountered again in the section on 'Writing ethnography' in Chapter 19.

The next three phases refer to 'a triple crisis' stemming from the fourth moment above.

5. *Postmodern period of experimental ethnographic writing*. Mid-1990s. Heavily influenced by postmodernism (see Key concept 17.1), work under this heading is characterized by an awareness of the different ways of representing research participants (often referred to as 'the other') when writing up findings. Qualitative researchers have tried different ways of representing the people on whom they conduct their investigations.
6. *Post-experimental enquiry*. 1995–2000. This period is associated mainly with the emergence of AltaMira Press, a publisher of qualitative research that encourages experimental and interdisciplinary writing. It describes itself as having a 'focus on interdisciplinary work, breaking long-standing boundaries' (www.altamirapress.com/RLA/About (accessed 11 October 2010)).
7. *The methodologically contested present*. 2000–4. This refers to a period in which there is considerable disagreement about how qualitative research should be conducted and the directions it should be heading. It is very much associated with the arrival of journals like *Qualitative Inquiry* and *Qualitative Research* that provide forums for these debates. While Denzin and Lincoln (2005b) date this period as 2000–4, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the contested methodological differences have not abated. One of the areas that has been a focus of the ongoing debates has been the issue of research quality criteria in relation to qualitative studies.
8. *Now*. 2005–. This period is characterized by a backlash against qualitative research with a reassertion in government circles of the value of traditional science. Some of these pressures are reviewed in Bryman (2008a).
9. *The fractured future*. Lincoln and Denzin (2005: 1123) also speculate about what the immediate future holds: 'Randomized field trials . . . will occupy the time of one group of researchers while the pursuit of a socially and culturally responsive, communitarian, justice-oriented set of studies will consume the meaningful working moments of the other.'

This timeline of phases is useful because it highlights the difficulty of characterizing 'qualitative research'. As Silverman (1993) observes, the term covers a number of different research methods and approaches to qualitative data that differ considerably. On the other hand, Denzin and Lincoln's 'moments' have to be treated with some caution. First, it has to be borne in mind that work that could be depicted in terms very similar to the first two phases continues to be conducted. Indeed, many of the qualitative investigations that serve as illustrations in Part Three are of this type. Although qualitative researchers may be more self-conscious nowadays about their influence on the research process and the significance of how they write, many qualitative studies are still characterized by realism, at least to some degree. Second, Denzin and Lincoln's later phases are associated too much with particular events—the arrival of a new publisher or new journals—which looks strange when viewed in relation to the several decades with which the earlier moments are associated. Third, their ninth and final moment seems to be concerned with a rift in social research in general rather than within qualitative research as such.



Key concept 17.1

What is postmodernism?

As noted in the main text, postmodernism is extremely difficult to pin down. Part of the problem is that, as an approach, postmodernism is at least two things. One is that it is an attempt to get to grips with the nature of modern society and culture. The other, which is the more relevant aspect for this book, is that it represents a way of thinking about and representing the nature of the social sciences and their claims to knowledge. In particular, it is a distinctive sensitivity regarding the representation of social scientific findings. Postmodernists tend to be deeply suspicious of notions that imply that it is possible to arrive at a definitive version of any reality. Reports of findings are viewed as versions of an external reality, so that the key issue becomes one of the plausibility of

those versions rather than whether they are right or wrong in any absolute sense. Typically, writers of a postmodernist persuasion have less to say about data-collection issues than about the writing and representation of social science findings, though it is probably the case that they are more sympathetic to qualitative than quantitative research (Alvesson 2002). Indeed, postmodernists have probably been most influential in qualitative research when discussing the nature of ethnographic accounts and questioning the ethnographer's implicit claim that he or she has provided a definitive account of a society. This thinking can be discerned in Van Maanen's (1988) implicit critique of 'realist tales' as he called them (see the section on 'Writing ethnography' in Chapter 19).

For postmodernists, there can be no sense of an objective reality out there waiting to be revealed to and uncovered by social scientists. That reality is always going to be accessed through narratives in the form of research reports that provide representations. With this shift in orientation came an interest in the language employed in research reports, like written ethnographies, to reveal the devices researchers use to convey the definitiveness of their findings (Delamont and Atkinson 2004). Postmodernists tend to emphasize the notion of reflexivity (see Key concept 17.5), which posits the significance of the researcher for the research process and consequently the tentativeness of any findings presented in a research report (since the researcher is always implicated in his or her findings). As this account of postmodernism implies, postmodernists tend to be deeply suspicious of any view of research that implies that there are or can be accepted foundations to knowledge, as is suggested by positivists (see Key concept 2.2). Postmodernism is a deeply disruptive stance on social research, in that it problematizes and questions our capacity ever to know anything. Views vary on postmodernism's current appeal.

Several reasons might be proposed for the unease among some writers concerning the specification of the nature of qualitative research. Two reasons might be regarded as having particular importance. First, qualitative research subsumes several diverse research methods that differ from each other considerably. The following are the main research methods associated with qualitative research.

- *Ethnography/participant observation.* While some caution is advisable in treating ethnography and participant observation as synonyms, in many respects they refer to similar if not identical approaches to data collection in which the researcher is immersed in a social setting for some time in order to observe and listen with a view to gaining an appreciation of the culture of a social group. It has been employed in such social research classics as Whyte's (1955) study of street corner life in a slum community and Gans's (1962) research on a similar group in the throes of urban redevelopment.
- *Qualitative interviewing.* This is a very broad term to describe a wide range of interviewing styles (see Key concept 9.2 for an introduction). Moreover, qualitative researchers employing ethnography or participant observation typically engage in a substantial amount of qualitative interviewing.
- *Focus groups* (see Key concept 9.2).
- Language-based approaches to the collection of qualitative data, such as **discourse analysis** and **conversation analysis**.
- The collection and qualitative analysis of **texts** and documents.

Each of these approaches to data collection will be examined in Part Three. The picture with regard to the very different methods and sources that comprise qualitative research is made somewhat more complex by the fact that a multi-method approach is frequently employed. As noted above, researchers employing ethnography or participant observation frequently conduct qualitative interviews. However, they also often collect and analyse texts and documents as well. Thus, there is considerable variability in the collection of data among studies that are typically deemed to be qualitative. Of course, quantitative research also subsumes several different methods of data collection (these were covered in Part Two), but the inclusion of methods concerned with the analysis of language as a form of qualitative research implies somewhat greater variability.

A second reason why there is some resistance to a delineation of the nature of qualitative research is that the connection between theory and research is somewhat more ambiguous than in quantitative research. With the latter research strategy, theoretical issues drive the formulation of a research question, which in turn

drives the collection and analysis of data. Findings then feed back into the relevant theory. This is rather a caricature, because what counts as ‘theory’ is sometimes little more than the research literature relating to a certain issue or area. In qualitative research, theory is supposed to be an outcome of an investigation rather than something that precedes it. However, some writers, like Silverman (1993: 24), have argued that such a depiction of qualitative research is ‘out of tune with the greater sophistication of contemporary field research design, born out of accumulated knowledge of interaction and

greater concern with issues of reliability and validity’. This is particularly the case with conversation analysis, an approach to the study of language that will be examined in Chapter 22. However, qualitative research is more usually regarded as denoting an approach in which theory and categorization emerge out of the collection and analysis of data. The more general point being made is that such a difference within qualitative research may account for the unease about depicting the research strategy in terms of a set of stages.



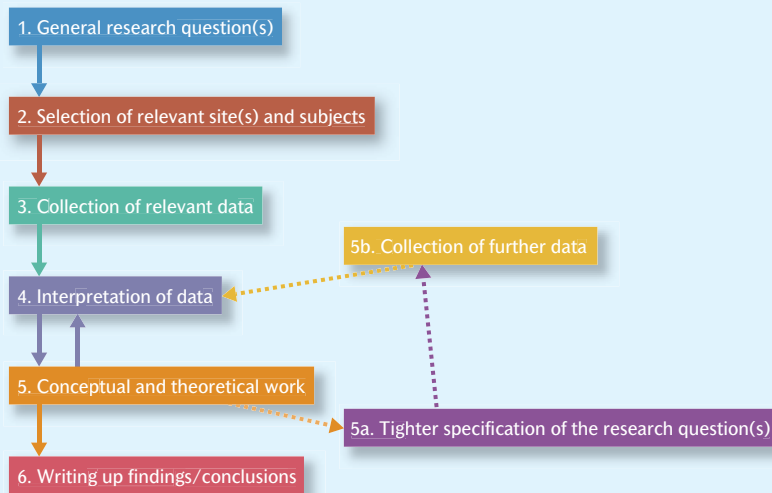
The main steps in qualitative research

The sequence outlined in Figure 17.1 provides a representation of how the qualitative research process can be visualized. In order to illustrate the steps, a published study by Foster (1995) of crime in communities will be used. This study was previously encountered in Research in focus 2.6.

- *Step 1. General research question(s).* The starting point for Foster’s (1995) study of crime in communities, particularly ones that contain predominantly public housing, is the high levels of crime in poorer areas. To the extent that it is a focus of attention, it is frequently assumed that communities with high levels of crime

Figure 17.1

An outline of the main steps of qualitative research





Thinking deeply 17.2

Research questions in qualitative research

Research questions in qualitative research are stated with varying degrees of explicitness. Sometimes, the research question is embedded within a general statement of the orientation of an article. Thus, the author of the research covered below in Research in focus 17.3 writes at the beginning of a long paragraph:

The main proposition in this article is that different masculinities are produced through performances that draw on the different cultural resources that are available in each setting. (Swain 2004: 167)

Others opt for a more explicit treatment of research questions. Ashforth et al. (2007) were interested in the phenomenon of 'dirty work', a term first introduced nearly fifty years previously to refer to work that is tainted 'physically, socially or morally' (Hughes 1958: 122; quoted in Ashforth et al. 2007: 149). The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with managers in eighteen such occupations in order to explore how the work is 'normalized'—that is, how they develop ways of dealing with or reducing the significance of the taint of dirty work. After a discussion of the literature and their view of its implications for their own work, they write:

In summary, our research questions were:

Research Question 1. What normalization challenges do managers in dirty work occupations face?

Research Question 2. What tactics do managers report using to normalize dirty work? (Ashforth et al. 2007: 151; italicized in original)

One factor that may affect the degree of explicitness with which research questions are stated is the outlet in which the research is published. Ashforth et al. (2007) published this article in the *Academy of Management Journal*, which in the past has tended to publish mainly empirical articles deriving from quantitative research. It may be that Ashforth et al. chose this format for presenting their research questions so that it would exhibit some of the characteristics of research questions or hypotheses in quantitative research that tend to be stated explicitly. As noted in Chapter 1, in their study of senior managers who retired early, Jones et al. (2010) stated their research questions explicitly though they were not formatted to stand out in the same way:

to what extent do our respondents construct a new balance of activities? Do respondents construct new discourses of everyday life? Does the move by respondents into leisure retirement create new tensions in other parts of their lives? (Jones et al. 2010: 105).

The researchers went on to investigate these research questions by collecting qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. The formulation of research questions in qualitative research, much as in quantitative research, is closely connected to the relevant literature. The research questions will be to a significant extent prompted and stimulated by the literature. The key points to consider are what it is you want to find out about and why it is important to know the answer. The literature will be central to both considerations. However, by no means all qualitative researchers agree about the importance of research questions at the outset of an investigation. Some exponents of grounded theory (see Key concept 17.2) advocate a much more open-ended strategy of beginning with a blank slate. As such, the literature becomes significant at later stages of helping to inform theoretical ideas as they emerge from the data and as a way of contextualizing the significance of the findings. There is considerable disagreement over the desirability of deferring a literature review. Dunne (2011) advocates a reflexive approach to reviewing the literature in grounded theory whereby the researcher reflects on the ways in which the literature may have influenced and moulded his or her understanding of the field. The literature review is such an expected element of social science writing that not to include one risks confusing or alienating reviewers or examiners. Also, the literature review does serve some useful purposes (as outlined in Chapter 5), such as making sure that you are not reinventing the wheel and learning from other researchers' methodological and other lapses of judgement, so there are practical risks associated with deferring contact with the literature.

tend to have low levels of social control. But Foster argues that we know very little about how informal social control operates in such communities and what its significance for crime is. She also notes that council estates are frequently presumed to be crime prone but that there is little evidence on 'the diversity in experience and attitudes of residents within individual estates' (Foster 1995: 563). It would be easy to presume that, to the extent that council estates are prone to high crime levels, they exhibit low levels of social control. Thus Foster formulates a general set of concerns revolving around council estates and their crime proneness and the possible role and dynamics of social control in the process. She also notes that some writers have suggested that the propensity to crime in council estates may be in part attributed to flaws in the design of the estates.

- *Step 2. Selection of relevant site(s) and subjects.* The research was conducted on a London council estate (with the fictitious name 'Riverside'), which had a high level of crime and which exhibited the kinds of housing features that are frequently associated with a propensity to crime. Relevant research participants, such as residents, were identified.
- *Step 3. Collection of relevant data.* Foster describes her research as 'ethnographic'. She spent eighteen months 'getting involved in as many aspects of life there as possible from attending tenant meetings, the mothers and toddlers group, and activities for young people, to socializing with some of the residents in the local pub' (Foster 1995: 566). Foster also tells us that 'extended interviews' were conducted with forty-five residents of Riverside (and another London estate, but the majority were from Riverside) and twenty-five 'officials', such as police and housing officers. Foster's account of her research methods suggests that she is likely to have generated two types of data: fieldwork notes based on her ethnographic observation of life in the community and detailed notes (and most probably transcripts) of interviews undertaken.
- *Step 4. Interpretation of data.* One of the key findings to emerge from the data is the fact that, in spite of the fact that Riverside has a high crime rate, it is not perceived as a problem in this regard by Riverside residents. For example, she quotes from an interview with an elderly tenant: 'They used to say that they couldn't let the flats [apartments] here . . . but I mean as far as muggings or anything like that you don't hear of nothing like that even now' (Foster 1995: 568). Instead, housing problems loomed larger in the minds

of residents than crime. She also found that 'hidden economy' crimes were prevalent on the estate and that much crime was tolerated by residents. She also observes that, contrary to expectations about estates like Riverside, there was clear evidence of informal social control mechanisms at work, such as shaming practices.

- *Step 5. Conceptual and theoretical work.* No new concepts seem to emerge from Foster's research, but her findings enable her to tie together some of the elements outlined above under Step 1. For example, she writes:

Crime then need not be damaging *per se* providing other factors cushion its impact. On Riverside these included support networks in which tenants felt that someone was watching out for their properties and provided links with people to whom they could turn if they were in trouble. Consequently while generalized fears about crime remained prevalent, familiarity and support went some way to reducing the potential for hostile encounters. (Foster 1995: 580)

It is this step, coupled with the interpretation of data, that forms the study's findings.

- *Steps 5a. Tighter specification of the research question(s), and 5b. Collection of further data.* There is no specific evidence from Foster's account that she followed a process in which she collected further data after she had built up early interpretations of her data. When this occurs, as it sometimes does in research within a grounded theory framework, there can be an interplay between interpretation and theorizing, on the one hand, and data collection, on the other. Such a strategy is frequently referred to as an *iterative* one. She does write at one point that some residents and officials were interviewed twice and in some cases even three times in the course of her research. This raises the possibility that she was re-interviewing certain individuals in the light of her emerging ideas about her data, but this can only be a speculation.
- *Step 6. Writing up findings/conclusions.* There is no real difference between the significance of writing up in quantitative research and qualitative research, so that exactly the same points made in relation to Step 11 in Figure 7.1 apply here. An audience has to be convinced about the credibility and significance of the interpretations offered. Researchers are not and cannot be simply conduits for the things they see and

the words they hear. The salience of what researchers have seen and heard has to be impressed on the audience. Foster does this by making clear to her audience that her findings have implications for policies regarding estates and crime and for our understanding of the links between housing, community, and crime. A key point to emerge from her work, which she emphasizes at several points in the article and hammers home in her concluding section, is that being an insider to

Riverside allowed her to see that a community that may be regarded by outsiders as having a high propensity towards crime should not be presumed to be seen in this way by members of that community.

Two particularly distinctive aspects of the sequence of steps in qualitative research are the highly related issues of the links between theory and concepts with research data. It is to these issues that we now turn.



Theory and research

Most qualitative researchers when writing about their craft emphasize a preference for treating theory as something that emerges out of the collection and analysis of data. As will be seen in Chapter 24, practitioners of **grounded theory**—a frequently cited approach to the analysis of qualitative data—especially stress the importance of allowing theoretical ideas to emerge out of one's data. But some qualitative researchers argue that qualitative data can and should have an important role in relation to the *testing* of theories as well. Silverman (1993), in particular, has argued that in more recent times qualitative researchers have become increasingly interested in the testing of theories and that this is a reflection of the growing maturity of the strategy. Certainly, there is no reason why qualitative research

cannot be employed in order to test theories that are specified in advance of data collection. In any case, much qualitative research entails the testing of theories in the course of the research process. So, in Figure 17.1, the loop back from Step 5a, 'Tighter specification of the research question(s)', to Step 5b, 'Collection of further data', implies that a theoretical position may emerge in the course of research and may spur the collection of further data to test that theory. This kind of oscillation between testing emerging theories and collecting data is a particularly distinctive feature of grounded theory. It is presented as a dashed line in Figure 17.1, because it is not as necessary a feature of the process of qualitative research as the other steps.



Key concept 17.2 What is grounded theory?

Grounded theory has been defined as 'theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another' (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 12). Thus, two central features of grounded theory are that it is concerned with the development of theory out of data and that the approach is iterative, or recursive, as it is sometimes called, meaning that data collection and analysis proceed in tandem, repeatedly referring back to each other.

As the discussion in this chapter shows, the two originators of the approach—Glaser and Strauss—eventually disagreed on the path on which Strauss was taking grounded theory. A further complication is that there is a lack of agreement on what grounded theory is. To some writers it is a distinct method or approach to qualitative research in its own right; to others, it is an approach to the generation of theory. It is this second view of grounded theory that is taken in this chapter. Grounded theory is not a theory—it is an approach to the generation of theory out of data. Usually, 'data' is taken to refer to qualitative data, but grounded theory can be used in connection with different kinds of data. One final complication to be noted is that, although it has just been suggested that grounded theory is a strategy for generating theory out of data, in many cases, reports using a grounded theory approach generate concepts rather than theory as such.

One key point that is implied by Figure 17.1 is that the typical sequence of steps in qualitative research entails the generation of theories rather than the testing of theories that are specified at the outset. Silverman

(1993) is undoubtedly correct that pre-specified theories *can be* and sometimes *are* tested with qualitative data, but the generation of theory tends to be the preferred approach.



Concepts in qualitative research

A central feature of Chapter 7 was the discussion of concepts and their measurement. For most qualitative researchers, developing measures of concepts will not be a significant consideration, but concepts are very much part of the landscape in qualitative research. However, the way in which concepts are developed and employed is often rather different from that implied in the quantitative research strategy. Blumer's (1954) distinction between 'definitive' and **sensitizing concepts** captures aspects of the different ways in which concepts are thought about.

Blumer (1954) argued stridently against the use of definitive concepts in social research. The idea of definitive concepts is typified by the way in which, in quantitative research, a concept, once developed, becomes fixed through the elaboration of indicators. For Blumer, such an approach entailed the application of a straitjacket on the social world, because the concept in question comes to be seen exclusively in terms of the indicators that have been developed for it. Fine nuances in the form that the concept can assume or alternative ways of viewing the concept and its manifestations are sidelined. In other words, definitive concepts are excessively concerned with what is common to the phenomena that the concept is supposed to subsume rather than with variety. Instead, Blumer (1954: 7) recommended that social researchers should recognize that the concepts they use are sensitizing concepts in that they provide 'a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances'.

For Blumer, then, concepts should be employed in such a way that they give a very general sense of what to look for and act as a means for uncovering the variety of forms that the phenomena to which they refer can assume. In providing a critique of definitive concepts, it is clear that Blumer had in mind the concept-indicator model described in Chapter 7. In other words, his views entailed in large part a critique of quantitative research and a programmatic statement that would form a springboard for an alternative approach that nowadays we would recognize as qualitative research.

Blumer's distinction is not without its problems. It is not at all clear how far a very general formulation of a concept can be regarded as a useful guide to empirical enquiry. If it is too general, it will simply fail to provide a useful starting point because its guidelines are too broad; if too narrow, it is likely to repeat some of the difficulties Blumer identified in relation to definitive concepts. However, his general view of concepts has attracted some support, because his preference for not imposing pre-ordained schemes on the social world chimes with that of many qualitative researchers. As the example in Research in focus 17.1 suggests, the researcher frequently starts out with a broad outline of a concept, which is revised and narrowed during the course of data collection. For subsequent researchers, the concept may be taken up and revised as it is employed in connection with different social contexts or in relation to somewhat different research questions.



Research in focus 17.1

The emergence of a concept in qualitative research: the case of emotional labour

Hochschild's (1983) idea of emotional labour—labour that 'requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (1983: 7)—has become a very influential concept in the sociology of work and in the developing area of the sociology of emotions.

Somewhat ironically for a predominantly qualitative study, Hochschild's initial conceptualization appears to have

emerged from a questionnaire she distributed to 261 university students. Within the questionnaire were two requests: 'Describe a real situation that was important to you in which you experienced a deep emotion' and 'Describe as fully and concretely as possible a real situation that was important to you in which you either changed the situation to fit your feelings or changed your feelings to fit the situation' (1983: 13). Thus, although a self-completion questionnaire was employed, the resulting data were qualitative. The data were analysed in terms of the idea of emotion *work*, which is the same as emotional labour but occurs in a private context. Emotional labour is essentially emotion work that is performed as part of one's paid employment. In order to develop the idea of emotional labour, Hochschild looked to the world of work. The main occupation she studied was the flight attendant. Several sources of data on emotional labour among flight attendants were employed. She gained access to Delta Airlines, a large American airline, and in the course of her investigations she:

- watched sessions for training attendants and had many conversations with both trainees and experienced attendants during the sessions;
- interviewed various personnel, such as managers in various sections, and advertising agents;
- examined Delta advertisements spanning thirty years;
- observed the flight attendant recruitment process at Pan American Airways, since she had not been allowed to do this at Delta;
- conducted 'open-ended interviews lasting three to five hours each with thirty flight attendants in the San Francisco Bay Area' (Hochschild 1983: 15).

In order to forge a comparison with a contrasting occupational group that is nonetheless also involved in emotional labour, Hochschild also interviewed five debt-collectors. In her book, she explores such topics as the human costs of emotional labour and the issue of gender in relation to it. It is clear that Hochschild's concept of emotional labour began as a somewhat imprecise idea that emerged out of a concern with emotion work and that was gradually developed in order to address its wider significance. The concept has been picked up by other qualitative researchers in the sociology of work. For example, Leidner (1993) has explored through ethnographic studies of a McDonald's restaurant and an insurance company the ways in which organizations seek to 'routinize' the display of emotional labour.



Reliability and validity in qualitative research

In Chapters 3 and 7 it was noted that reliability and validity are important criteria in establishing and assessing the quality of research for the quantitative researcher. However, there has been some discussion among qualitative researchers concerning their relevance for qualitative research. Moreover, even writers who do take the view that the criteria are relevant have considered the possibility that the meanings of the terms need to be altered. For example, the issue of measurement validity almost by definition seems to carry connotations of measurement. Since measurement is not a major preoccupation among qualitative researchers, the issue of validity would seem to have little bearing on such studies. As foreshadowed briefly in Chapter 3, a number of different stances have been taken by qualitative researchers in relation to these issues.

Adapting reliability and validity for qualitative research

One stance is to assimilate reliability and validity into qualitative research with little change of meaning other than playing down the salience of measurement issues. Mason (1996: 21), for example, argues that reliability, validity, and generalizability (which is the main component of external validity—see Chapter 3) 'are different kinds of measures of the quality, rigour and wider potential of research, which are achieved according to certain methodological and disciplinary conventions and principles'. She sticks very closely to the meaning that these criteria have in quantitative research, where they have been largely developed. Thus, validity refers to whether 'you are observing, identifying, or "measuring" what you

say you are' (Mason 1996: 24). LeCompte and Goetz (1982) and Kirk and Miller (1986) also write about reliability and validity in relation to qualitative research but invest the terms with a somewhat different meaning from Mason. LeCompte and Goetz write about the following.

- *External reliability*, by which they mean the degree to which a study can be replicated. This is a difficult criterion to meet in qualitative research, since, as LeCompte and Goetz recognize, it is impossible to 'freeze' a social setting and the circumstances of an initial study to make it replicable in the sense in which the term is usually employed (see Chapter 7). However, they suggest several strategies that can be introduced in order to approach the requirements of external reliability. For example, they suggest that a qualitative researcher replicating ethnographic research needs to adopt a similar social role to that adopted by the original researcher. Otherwise what a researcher conducting a replication sees and hears will not be comparable to the original research.
- *Internal reliability*, by which they mean whether, when there is more than one observer, members of the research team agree about what they see and hear. This is a similar notion to *inter-observer consistency* (see Key concept 7.3).
- *Internal validity*, by which they mean whether there is a good match between researchers' observations and the theoretical ideas they develop. LeCompte and Goetz argue that internal validity tends to be a strength of qualitative research, particularly ethnographic research, because the prolonged participation in the social life of a group over a long period of time allows the researcher to ensure a high level of congruence between concepts and observations.
- *External validity*, which refers to the degree to which findings can be generalized across social settings. LeCompte and Goetz argue that, unlike internal validity, external validity represents a problem for qualitative researchers because of their tendency to employ case studies and small samples.

As this brief treatment suggests, qualitative researchers have tended to employ the terms reliability and validity in very similar ways to quantitative researchers when seeking to develop criteria for assessing research.

Alternative criteria for evaluating qualitative research

However, a second position in relation to reliability and validity in qualitative research can be discerned. Some

writers have suggested that qualitative studies should be judged or evaluated according to quite different criteria from those used by quantitative researchers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose that it is necessary to specify terms and ways of establishing and assessing the quality of qualitative research that provide an alternative to reliability and validity. They propose two primary criteria for assessing a qualitative study: *trustworthiness* and *authenticity*.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is made up of four criteria, each of which has an equivalent criterion in quantitative research:

1. *credibility*, which parallels internal validity;
2. *transferability*, which parallels external validity;
3. *dependability*, which parallels reliability;
4. *confirmability*, which parallels objectivity.

A major reason for Guba and Lincoln's unease about the simple application of reliability and validity standards to qualitative research is that the criteria presuppose that a single absolute account of social reality is feasible. In other words, they are critical of the view (described in Chapter 2 as *realist*) that there are absolute truths about the social world that it is the job of the social scientist to reveal. Instead, they argue that there can be more than one and possibly several accounts.

Credibility

The significance of this stress on multiple accounts of social reality is especially evident in the trustworthiness criterion of *credibility*. After all, if there can be several possible accounts of an aspect of social reality, it is the feasibility or credibility of the account that a researcher arrives at that is going to determine its acceptability to others. The establishment of the credibility of findings entails both ensuring that research is carried out according to the canons of good practice *and* submitting research findings to the members of the social world who were studied for confirmation that the investigator has correctly understood that social world. This latter technique is often referred to as **respondent validation** or **member validation** (see Key concept 17.3). Another technique they recommend is **triangulation** (see Key concept 17.4).

Transferability

Because qualitative research typically entails the intensive study of a small group, or of individuals sharing



Key concept 17.3

What is respondent validation?

Respondent validation, which is also sometimes called member validation, is a process whereby a researcher provides the people on whom he or she has conducted research with an account of his or her findings.

The aim of the exercise is to seek corroboration or otherwise of the account that the researcher has arrived at.

Respondent validation has been particularly popular among qualitative researchers, because they frequently want to ensure that there is a good correspondence between their findings and the perspectives and experiences of their research participants. The form that respondent validation can assume varies. There are several different forms of respondent validation.

- The researcher provides each research participant with an account of what he or she has said to the researcher in an interview and conversations, or of what the researcher observed by watching that person in the course of an observational study. For example, Bloor (1978, 1997) reports that he carried out observations of ear, nose, and throat (ENT) consultants concerning their approaches to making decisions about the assessment of patients. He submitted a report to each consultant on his or her practices.
- The researcher feeds back to a group of people or an organization his or her impressions and findings in relation to that group or organization. Bloor (1997) says that, for his research on therapeutic communities, he conducted group discussions (which were taped) with community members to gauge reactions to draft research reports.
- The researcher feeds back to a group of people or an organization some of his or her writings that are based on a study of that group or organization (for example, articles, book chapters). Ball (1984) asked teachers in a school in which he had conducted ethnographic research to comment on draft articles and chapters, and similarly Willis (1977) asked the young working-class males who were the focus of his ethnography to comment on draft chapters, as did Skeggs (1994) for her parallel study of young working-class women (see Research in focus 19.7 for further details).

In each case, the goal is to seek confirmation that the researcher's findings and impressions are congruent with the views of those on whom the research was conducted and to seek out areas in which there is a lack of correspondence and the reasons for it. However, the idea is not without practical difficulties.

- Respondent validation may occasion defensive reactions on the part of research participants and even censorship.
- Bloor (1997: 45) observes that, because some approaches to enquiry may result in research participants developing relationships with the researcher of 'fondness and mutual regard', there may be a reluctance to be critical.
- It is highly questionable whether research participants can validate a researcher's analysis, since this entails inferences being made for an audience of social science peers. This means that, even though the first two methods of respondent validation may receive a corroborative response, the researcher still has to make a further leap, through the development of concepts and theories, in providing a social science frame for the resulting publications. If the third method of respondent validation is employed, it is unlikely that the social scientific analyses will be meaningful to research participants. Hobbs (1993) fed back some of his writings on entrepreneurship in London's East End to his informants, and it is clear that they made little sense of what he had written. Similarly, Skeggs (1994: 86) reports: '“Can't understand a bloody word it says” was the most common response' (see Research in focus 19.7 for further details of this study).



Key concept 17.4

What is triangulation?

Triangulation entails using more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena. The term has been employed somewhat more broadly by Denzin (1970: 310) to refer to an approach that uses 'multiple observers, theoretical perspectives, sources of data, and methodologies', but the emphasis has tended to be on methods of investigation and sources of data. One of the reasons for the advocacy by Webb et al. (1966) of a greater use of unobtrusive methods was their potential in relation to a strategy of triangulation (see Key concept 14.3). Triangulation can operate within and across research strategies. It was originally conceptualized by Webb et al. (1966) as an approach to the development of measures of concepts, whereby more than one method would be employed in the development of measures, resulting in greater confidence in findings. As such, triangulation was very much associated with a quantitative research strategy. However, triangulation can also take place within a qualitative research strategy. In fact, ethnographers often check out their observations with interview questions to determine whether they might have misunderstood what they had seen. Bloor (1997) reports that he tackled the process of death certification in a Scottish city in two ways: interviewing clinicians with a responsibility for certifying causes of deaths, and asking the same people to complete dummy death certificates based on case summaries he had prepared. Increasingly, triangulation is also being used to refer to a process of cross-checking findings deriving from both quantitative and qualitative research (Deacon et al. 1998). Triangulation represents just one way in which it may be useful to think about the integration of these two research strategies and is covered in Chapter 27 in the context of mixed methods research.

certain characteristics (that is, depth rather than the breadth that is a preoccupation in quantitative research), qualitative findings tend to be oriented to the contextual uniqueness and significance of the aspect of the social world being studied. As Lincoln and Guba (1985: 316) put it, whether findings 'hold in some other context, or even in the same context at some other time, is an empirical issue'. Instead, qualitative researchers are encouraged to produce what Geertz (1973a) calls **thick description**—that is, rich accounts of the details of a culture. Lincoln and Guba argue that a thick description provides others with what they refer to as a database for making judgments about the possible transferability of findings to other milieux.

Dependability

As a parallel to reliability in quantitative research, Lincoln and Guba propose the idea of dependability and argue that, to establish the merit of research in terms of this criterion of trustworthiness, researchers should adopt an 'auditing' approach. This entails ensuring that complete records are kept of all phases of the research process—problem formulation, selection of research participants, fieldwork notes, interview transcripts, data analysis decisions, and so on—in an accessible manner. Peers would then act as auditors, possibly during the course of the research and certainly at the end to establish how far proper procedures are being and have been followed.

This would include assessing the degree to which theoretical inferences can be justified. Auditing has not become a popular approach to enhancing the dependability of qualitative research. A rare example is a study of behaviour at an American 'swap meet', where second-hand goods are bought and sold (Belk et al. 1988). A team of three researchers collected data over four days through observation, interviews, photography, and video-recording. The researchers conducted several trustworthiness tests, such as respondent validation and triangulation. But, in addition, they submitted their draft manuscript and entire data set to three peers, whose task 'was to criticize the project for lack of sufficient data for drawing its conclusions if they saw such a void' (Belk et al. 1988: 456). The study highlights some problems associated with the auditing idea. One is that it is very demanding for the auditors, bearing in mind that qualitative research frequently generates extremely large data sets, and it may be that this is a major reason why it has not become a pervasive approach to validation.

Confirmability

Confirmability is concerned with ensuring that, while recognizing that complete objectivity is impossible in social research, the researcher can be shown to have acted in good faith; in other words, it should be apparent that he or she has not overtly allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations manifestly to sway the conduct of

the research and the findings deriving from it. Lincoln and Guba propose that establishing confirmability should be one of the objectives of auditors.

Authenticity

In addition to these four trustworthiness criteria, Lincoln and Guba suggest criteria of *authenticity*. These criteria raise a wider set of issues concerning the wider political impact of research. These are the criteria:

- *Fairness*. Does the research fairly represent different viewpoints among members of the social setting?
- *Ontological authenticity*. Does the research help members to arrive at a better understanding of their social milieu?
- *Educative authenticity*. Does the research help members to appreciate better the perspectives of other members of their social setting?
- *Catalytic authenticity*. Has the research acted as an impetus to members to engage in action to change their circumstances?
- *Tactical authenticity*. Has the research empowered members to take the steps necessary for engaging in action?

The authenticity criteria are thought-provoking but have not been influential, and their emphasis on the wider impact of research is controversial. They have certain points of affinity with **action research** (see Key concept 17.6), which by and large has not been a popular form of social research, though it has had some impact in fields like organization studies and education. The emphasis on practical outcomes differentiates it from most social research.

Recent discussions about quality criteria for qualitative research

The main point of discussing Lincoln and Guba's ideas is that they differ from writers like LeCompte and Goetz in seeking criteria for evaluating qualitative research that represent a departure from those employed by quantitative researchers. The issue of research quality in relation to qualitative investigations has become a rather contested area in recent years, with several schemes of criteria being proposed as possible alternatives to reliability and validity as criteria and to schemes like Lincoln and Guba's list. For example, Yardley (2000) has proposed the following four criteria:

- *Sensitivity to context*: sensitivity not just to the context of the social setting in which the research is conducted but also to potentially relevant theoretical positions and ethical issues.
- *Commitment and rigour*: substantial engagement with the subject matter, having the necessary skills, and thorough data collection and analysis.
- *Transparency and coherence*: research methods clearly specified, clearly articulated argument, and a reflexive stance (see Key concept 17.5 on **reflexivity**).
- *Impact and importance*: importance of having an impact on and significance for theory, the community on which the research is conducted and for practitioners.

When compiling these criteria, Yardley had in mind health researchers who are likely to emphasize the impact of a study, which probably accounts for the presence of the last of these four criteria—impact and importance—which has some affinities with Lincoln and Guba's authenticity criteria.



Key concept 17.5 What is reflexivity?

Reflexivity has several meanings in the social sciences. The term is employed by ethnomethodologists to refer to the way in which speech and action are constitutive of the social world in which they are located; in other words, they do more than merely act as indicators of deeper phenomena (see Chapter 22). The other meaning of the term carries the connotation that social researchers should be reflective about the implications of their methods, values, biases, and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate. Relatedly, reflexivity entails a sensitivity to the researcher's cultural, political, and social context. As such, 'knowledge' from a reflexive position is always a reflection of a researcher's location in time and social space. This notion is especially explicit in Pink's (2001) formulation of a reflexive approach to the use of visual images (see Chapter 19) and in Plummer's (2001) delineation of a reflexive approach to life histories (see the section on 'Life history and oral history interviewing' in Chapter 20).

There has been evidence of a growing reflexivity in social research in the form of an industry of books that collect together inside stories of the research process that detail the nuts and bolts of research as distinct from the often sanitized portrayal in research articles. An early volume edited by P. Hammond (1964) paved the way for a large number of imitators (e.g. Bell and Newby 1977; Bell and Roberts 1984; Bryman 1988b), and the confessional tales referred to in Chapter 19 are invariably manifestations of this development. Therefore, the rise of reflexivity largely predates the growing awareness of postmodern thinking since the late 1980s. What distinguishes the reflexivity that has followed in the wake of postmodernism is a greater awareness and acknowledgement of the role of the researcher as part and parcel of the construction of knowledge. In other words, the reflexive attitude within postmodernism is highly critical of the notion that the researcher is someone who extracts knowledge from observations and conversations with others and then transmits knowledge to an audience. The researcher is viewed as implicated in the construction of knowledge through the stance that he or she assumes in relation to the observed and through the ways in which an account is transmitted in the form of a text. This understanding entails an acknowledgement of the implications and significance of the researcher's choices as both observer and writer.

However, reflexivity is a notoriously slippery concept. Lynch (2000) has complained that too often it is assumed that a reflexive position is somehow superior to an unreflexive one. The case for the superiority of reflexivity is rarely made. Moreover, he points out that the term has different meanings. One of these is methodological reflexivity, which comes closest to the kind of reflexivity that is being referred to in this chapter. However, this meaning has a number of sub-meanings, three of which are especially prominent in methodological writings.

1. *Philosophical self-reflection*: an introspection involving 'an inward-looking, sometimes confessional and self-critical examination of one's own beliefs and assumptions' (Lynch 2000: 29).
2. *Methodological self-consciousness*: taking account of one's relationships with those whom one studies.
3. *Methodological self-criticism*: the confessional style of ethnographic writing (see Chapter 19), but Lynch notes that the injunction to be self-critical that is associated with such ethnographic writing is much more pervasive in academic disciplines.

The term 'reflexivity' has to be used with a degree of caution, as Lynch's discussion implies.

Perhaps in response to the proliferation of different lists of qualitative research criteria and also because of the lack of agreed criteria, Spencer et al. (2003) have produced an extremely comprehensive list (see Thinking deeply 17.3). This list of quality criteria draws on the schemes that already existed at the time of their research and also on consultations with researchers in various fields. These consultations were in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with practising researchers and writers on social research methods. In fact, I was one of the interviewees and also a focus group participant.

The fact that qualitative researchers have been seeking to make progress in formulating quality criteria appropriate to their approach does not mean that this necessarily has an impact on the reception of their research. Pratt (2008) has shown that many qualitative researchers believe that their work continues to be judged by criteria associated with validity and reliability that were introduced in Chapter 3 and that tend to be viewed as more

appropriate to quantitative research. This tendency has implications for the nature of the research that does get published in academic journals, in that it gives an advantage to those researchers working within a quantitative research tradition. In other words, although qualitative researchers have sought to develop what they deem to be appropriate criteria, the impact on the evaluation of research is not as great as might be expected.

Between quantitative and qualitative research criteria

Hammersley (1992a) lies midway between the preference for adapting quantitative research criteria and the preference for alternative quality criteria when assessing the quality of qualitative investigations. He proposes that validity is an important criterion but reformulates it somewhat. For Hammersley, validity means that an empirical account must be plausible and credible and should take into account the amount and kind of



Thinking deeply 17.3

Using checklists for appraising quality in qualitative research?

Spencer et al. (2003) were commissioned to produce a report for the UK government's Cabinet Office that aimed to provide a framework for assessing the quality of evaluation research studies that derived from qualitative investigations. Although their report focused upon evaluation research (see Key concept 3.5), they drew on considerations relating more generally to qualitative research, so that their scheme has a relevance beyond evaluation research.

The authors produced what is probably the most comprehensive list of criteria around. Here are the criteria that they suggest should be used when appraising the quality of a qualitative research study. In the case of each criterion, the original wording has been used.

1. How credible are the findings?
2. Has knowledge/understanding been extended by the research?
3. How well does the evaluation address its original aims and purposes?
4. Scope for drawing wider influences—how well is this explained?
5. How clear is the basis of the evaluative appraisal?
6. How defensible is the research design?
7. How well defended is the sample design/target selection of cases/documents?
8. Sample composition/case inclusion—how well is the eventual coverage described?
9. How well was the data collection carried out?
10. How well has the approach to, and formulation of, the analysis been conveyed?
11. Contexts of data sources—how well are they retained and portrayed?
12. How well has diversity of perspective and content been explored?
13. How well has detail, depth and complexity (richness?) of the data been conveyed?
14. How clear are the links between data, interpretation and conclusions—i.e. how well can the route to any conclusions be seen?
15. How clear and coherent is the reporting?
16. How clear are the assumptions/theoretical perspectives/values that have shaped the form and output of the evaluation?
17. What evidence is there of attention to ethical issues?
18. How adequately has the research process been documented?

Each of these eighteen criteria comes with 'quality indicators' that are designed to help in the appraisal of a study. What is not clear is how such a framework should be used. It has the appearance of a checklist, but, as Spencer et al. (2003: 90) note, there is resistance within the qualitative research community to the possibly rigid application of any list of criteria that a checklist would entail. The researchers found that the idea of checklists of quality criteria was generally regarded rather negatively by interviewees. In fact, Spencer et al. do not promote their framework as a checklist, noting various concerns about their use in qualitative research, such as the risk of checklists becoming too prescriptive or of being applied too rigidly. However, the fact that the authors do not treat their work as leading to a checklist does not mean that the framework cannot or should not be used in that way. Indeed, around the same time that Spencer and his colleagues published their report, Michael Quinn Patton, a leading qualitative evaluation researcher, published online a list of criteria that was designed to be used as a checklist—see: www.wmich.edu/evalctr/archive_checklists/qec.pdf (accessed 7 February 2011).

What do you think? Can checklists be valuable for appraising the quality of qualitative studies? If your answer is no, why is that? Is it something to do with the nature of qualitative research that makes checklists of quality

inappropriate? Might checklists be more valuable in appraising the quality of quantitative research? The full report by Spencer *et al.* can be found at:

www.civilservice.gov.uk/Assets/a_quality_framework_tcm6-7314.pdf (accessed 11 October 2010).

There has been a proliferation of various schemes for appraising and/or thinking about quality criteria for qualitative research. These schemes often include similar criteria to those produced by Spencer *et al.* but repackaged them in various ways. For example, Tracy (2010) stipulates eight criteria:

1. Worthy topic—relevant, interesting, significant, etc.
2. Rich rigour—rich data supplied in abundance and appropriately
3. Sincerity—the researcher is reflexive (see Key concept 17.5) about values and biases and is transparent in approach
4. Credibility—implements practices such as thick descriptions, triangulation (see Key concept 17.4), and respondent validation (see Key concept 17.3)
5. Resonance—has an affecting impact on readers
6. Significant contribution—makes an impact in terms of such outcomes as theory, practice, and morality
7. Ethical—considers and engages in ethical practices
8. Meaningful coherence—addresses what it claims to address, uses appropriate methods, and links research questions, literature, findings and interpretations.

These eight criteria cover similar ground to the Spencer *et al.* scheme but bundle them together differently. The notion of 'resonance' is possibly the main element that is not explicitly outlined in their scheme. Stige, Malterud, and Midtgarden (2009) have also produced a list of what appear to be criteria for qualitative research and which cover similar ground to Spencer *et al.* and Tracey. However, Stige *et al.* argue that that the items they outline should be thought of as an agenda for dialogue about qualitative research rather than as strict criteria around which there is a consensus. Thus, these authors are inviting us to think about qualitative research quality criteria differently.

evidence used in relation to an account. In proposing this criterion, Hammersley's position shares with realism (see Key concept 2.3) the notion that there is an external social reality that can be accessed by the researcher. However, he simultaneously shares with the critics of the empirical realist position the rejection of the notion that such access is direct and in particular that the researcher can act as a mirror on the social world, reflecting its image back to an audience. Instead, the researcher is always engaged in representations or constructions of that world. The plausibility and credibility of a researcher's 'truth claims' then become the main considerations in evaluating qualitative research. Hammersley's *subtle realist* account, as he calls it, entails recognizing that we can never be absolutely certain about the truth of any account, since we have no completely incontrovertible way of gaining direct access to the reality on which it is based. Therefore, he argues, 'we must judge the validity of claims [about truth] on the basis of the adequacy of

the evidence offered in support of them' (1992a: 69). This means that an account can be held to be 'valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise' (1992a: 69).

Hammersley also suggests *relevance* as an important criterion of qualitative research. Relevance is taken to be assessed from the vantage point of the importance of a topic within its substantive field or the contribution it makes to the literature on that field. Hammersley also discusses the question of whether the concerns of practitioners (that is, people who are part of the social setting being investigated and who are likely to have a vested interest in the research question and the implications of findings deriving from it) might be an aspect of considerations of relevance. In this way, his approach touches on the kinds of consideration that are addressed by Guba and Lincoln's authenticity criteria (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Guba and Lincoln 1994). However, he recognizes



Key concept 17.6

What is action research?

There is no single type of action research, but broadly it can be defined as an approach in which the action researcher and members of a social setting collaborate in the diagnosis of a problem and in the development of a solution based on the diagnosis. It can take a variety of forms, from the action researcher being hired by a client to work on the diagnosis to and solution of a problem, to working with a group of individuals who are identified as needing to develop a capacity for independent action. The collection of data is likely to be involved in the formulation of the diagnosis of a problem and in the emergence of a solution. In action research, the investigator becomes part of the field of study. Action research can involve the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Gibson (2004: 5) describes a Canadian project that was interested in the social and cultural factors that have an impact on the prevention and treatment of tuberculosis (TB) among 'foreign-born and aboriginal populations'. The idea for the project came from a nurse in a TB clinic who garnered support from the groups most affected by the disease. An advisory committee, which drew its membership from the local community in a province of Alberta, as well as from community, government, and academic constituencies, was formed. Two representatives from each of the ten distinct socio-cultural communities were recruited and acted as research associates. Following training, they collected data through interviews and analysed some of the resulting data. Interviews were conducted in relation to four groups: TB sufferers; people on prophylaxis; people who refused prophylaxis; and 'those with a more distant history of TB in their country of origin or on aboriginal reserves' (Gibson 2004: 5). The research associates, members of the advisory committee, and academic staff analysed the interview data. The findings revealed that, while the health care system deals well with active TB cases, it is less effective in relation to prevention in relation to communities at risk. It also revealed that health professionals often fail to identify TB because it is not prevalent in Western nations. The advisory group then produced a plan to disseminate its findings and developed other initiatives including 'an information video, a community education nurse position, and TB fact sheet in their various languages' (Gibson 2004: 5).

Action research is more common in some social science areas than others. It is more common in fields such as business and management research and social policy than others. It is sometimes dismissed by academics for lacking rigour and for being too partisan in approach. However, it is advocated by some researchers because of its commitment to involving people in the diagnosis of and solutions to problems rather than imposing on them solutions to predefined problems.

Action research should not be confused with *evaluation research* (Key concept 3.5), which usually denotes the study of the impact of an intervention, such as a new social policy or a new innovation in organizations. The research referred to in Research in focus 17.6 was conducted broadly with an evaluation research frame of reference in that it was concerned to evaluate the impact of the introduction of performance appraisal in British universities.

that the kinds of research questions and findings that might be of interest to practitioners and researchers are likely to be somewhat different. As Hammersley notes, practitioners are likely to be interested in research that helps them to understand or address problems with which they are confronted. These may not be (and perhaps are unlikely to be) at the forefront of a researcher's set of preoccupations. However, there may be occasions when researchers can combine the two and may even be able to use this capability as a means of securing access to

organizations in which they wish to conduct research (see Chapter 19 for a further discussion of access issues).

Overview of the issue of criteria

There is a recognition—albeit to varying degrees—that a simple application of the quantitative researcher's criteria of reliability and validity to qualitative research is not desirable, but writers vary in the degree to which they propose a complete overhaul of those criteria. Nor do the

three positions outlined above—adapting quantitative research criteria, alternative criteria, and Hammersley's subtle realism—represent the full range of possible stances on this issue (Hammersley 1992a; Seale 1999). To a large extent, the differences between the three positions reflect divergences in the degree to which a realist position is broadly accepted or rejected. Writers on qualitative research who apply the ideas of reliability and validity with little if any adaptation broadly position themselves as realists—that is, as saying that social reality can be captured by qualitative researchers through their concepts and theories. Lincoln and Guba reject this view, arguing instead that qualitative researchers' concepts and theories are representations and that there may, therefore, be other equally credible representations of the same phenomena. Hammersley's position occupies a middle ground in terms of the axis, with realism at one end and anti-realism at the other, in that, while acknowledging the existence of social phenomena that are part of an external reality, he disavows any suggestion that it is possible to reproduce that reality for the audiences of social scientific endeavour. Most qualitative researchers nowadays probably operate around the midpoint on this realism axis, though without necessarily endorsing Hammersley's views. Typically, they treat their accounts as one of a number of possible representations rather than as definitive versions of social reality. They also bolster those accounts through some of the strategies advocated by Lincoln and Guba, such as thick descriptions, respondent validation exercises, and triangulation.

To a certain extent, traditional quantitative research criteria have made something of a comeback since the

late 1990s. One issue is to do with the perception of qualitative research. For one thing, to reject notions such as reliability and validity could be taken by some constituencies (such as funding bodies) as indicative of a lack of concern with rigour, which is not a desirable impression to create. Consequently, there has been some evidence of increased concern with such issues. Armstrong et al. (1997) report the result of an exercise in what they call 'inter-rater reliability', which involved the analysis by six experienced researchers of a focus group transcript. The transcript related to research concerned with links between perceptions of disability and genetic screening. The focus group was made up of sufferers of cystic fibrosis (CF), and the participants were asked to discuss genetic screening. The raters were asked to extract prominent themes from transcripts, which is one of the main ways of analysing qualitative data (see Chapter 24). They tended to identify similar themes but differed in how themes were 'packaged'. One theme that was identified was 'visibility'. This theme was identified as a theme in transcripts by all researchers and refers to the invisibility of genetic disorders. The CF sufferers felt disadvantaged relative to other disabled groups because of the invisibility of their disorder and felt that the public were more sympathetic to and more inclined to recognize visible disabilities. However, some analysts linked it to other issues: two linked it with stigma; one to problems of managing invisibility. In a sense the results are somewhat inconclusive but are interesting for this discussion because they reveal an interest among qualitative researchers in reliability. A more recent and similar exercise is described in Research in focus 17.2.



Research in focus 17.2

Reliability for qualitative researchers

Gladney et al. (2003) report the findings of an exercise in which two multidisciplinary teams of researchers were asked to analyse qualitative interviews with eighty Texas school students. The interviews were concerned with reflections on violence on television; reasons for violence among some young people; and reasons for some young people *not* being violent. One group of raters read interview transcripts of the interviews; the other group listened to the audio-taped recordings. Thus, the dice were slightly loaded in favour of different themes being identified by the two groups. In spite of this there was remarkable consistency between the two groups in the themes identified. For example, in response to the question 'Why are some young people violent?', Group One identified the following themes: family/parental influence; peer influence; social influence; media influence; and coping. Group Two's themes were: the way they were raised; media influence; appearance; anger, revenge, protection; and environmental or peer influence. Such findings are quite reassuring and are interesting because of their clear interest in reliability in a qualitative research context. Interestingly, exercises such as this can be viewed as a form of what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call *auditing*.



Student experience

Thinking about reliability

Hannah Creane was concerned about the reliability of her categorization of her qualitative data and enlisted others to check out her thinking.

There was a slight concern when I was grouping data together that my categorization was of an arbitrary nature, and so I could be making assumptions and theorizing on the basis of highly subjective categories. However, I tried to make sure that all the categories I used were relevant, and I checked them over with other people to make sure they made sense in relation to the research and the questions I was dealing with.



To read more about Hannah's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/



The main preoccupations of qualitative researchers

As was noted in Chapter 7, quantitative and qualitative research can be viewed as exhibiting a set of distinctive but contrasting preoccupations. These preoccupations reflect epistemologically grounded beliefs about what constitutes acceptable knowledge. In Chapter 2, it was suggested that at the level of epistemology, whereas quantitative research is profoundly influenced by a natural science approach to what should count as acceptable knowledge, qualitative researchers are more influenced by interpretivism (see Key concept 2.4). This position can itself be viewed as the product of the confluence of three related stances: Weber's notion of *Verstehen*; symbolic interactionism; and phenomenology. In this section, five distinctive preoccupations among qualitative researchers will be outlined and examined.

Seeing through the eyes of the people being studied

An underlying premiss of many qualitative researchers is that the subject matter of the social sciences (that is, people and their social world) does differ from the subject matter of the natural sciences. A key difference is that the objects of analysis of the natural sciences (atoms, molecules, gases, chemicals, metals, and so on) cannot attribute meaning to events and to their environment. However, people *do*. This argument is especially evident in the work of Schutz and can particularly be seen in the passage quoted on page 30, where Schutz draws attention to the fact that, unlike the objects of the natural sciences, the objects of the social sciences—people—are capable of attributing meaning to their environment.

Consequently, many qualitative researchers have suggested that a methodology is required for studying people that reflects these differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences. As a result, many qualitative researchers express a commitment to viewing events and the social world through the eyes of the people that they study. The social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied, rather than as though those subjects were incapable of their own reflections on the social world. The epistemology underlying qualitative research has been expressed by the authors of one widely read text as involving two central tenets: '(1) . . . face-to-face interaction is the fullest condition of participating in the mind of another human being, and (2) . . . you must participate in the mind of another human being (in sociological terms, "take the role of the other") to acquire social knowledge' (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 16).

It is not surprising, therefore, that many researchers make claims in their reports of their investigations about having sought to take the views of the people they studied as the point of departure. This tendency reveals itself in frequent references to empathy and seeing through others' eyes. Here are some examples.

- Fielding (1982) carried out research on members of the National Front, a British extreme right-wing political party. In spite of his feelings of revulsion for the racist doctrine, he sought to examine the party's position 'as a moral posture and its members' interpretations were to be illuminated by an empathetic immersion in their world. In the process of "telling it

like it was for them”, I could reproduce an account from which outsiders could understand the ideology’s persuasiveness to people so placed’ (Fielding 1982: 83).

- Armstrong (1993) carried out ethnographic research on football hooliganism through participant observation with Sheffield United supporters. He describes his work as located in ‘*Verstehende* sociology—trying to think oneself into the situations of the people one is interested in . . . in this case the “Hooligan”. This approach involves recognizing social and historical phenomena as beyond any single or simple identifying cause and attempting to make sense from the social actors’ viewpoint’ (Armstrong 1993: 5–6).
- In the opening sentence of their book, which is based on an ethnographic study of the work of itinerant technical contractors in the USA, Barley and Kunda (2004: p. ix) write: ‘As ethnographers, our agenda is to depict the world of technical contracting from the perspective of those who live in it.’ They go on to claim that their work ‘is the story of contracting told from the participants’ perspectives’ (2004: 30).
- For their research on teenaged girls’ views on and experiences of violence, Burman et al. (2001: 447) ‘sought to ground the study in young women’s experiences of violence, hearing their accounts and privileging their subjective views’.



Student experience

Importance of seeing through research participants’ eyes

Rebecca Barnes was attracted to qualitative research for her research on violence in same-sex relationships because there had been only quantitative research in this area and because she wanted to understand the phenomenon in her research participants’ own words.

I chose a qualitative research design for a number of reasons. First, I was aware that very little qualitative research exists in my field of research, and at the time that I started my research, I could not find any comprehensive qualitative studies of woman-to-woman partner abuse in the UK. Thus, I wanted my research to contribute towards filling this gap, on a national and international level. I also chose a qualitative research design because I wanted to achieve an in-depth understanding of the experiences of woman-to-woman partner abuse that women reported in their own words and using their own frames of reference. I also set out to achieve a more textured analysis of the dynamics of abuse and the different impacts that being abused has upon women, and how these may change over time.



To read more about Rebecca’s research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

This predilection for seeing through the eyes of the people studied in the course of qualitative research is often accompanied by the closely related goal of seeking to probe beneath surface appearances. After all, by taking the position of the people you are studying, the prospect is raised that they might view things differently from what an outsider with little direct contact might have expected. This stance reveals itself in:

- Foster’s (1995) research on a high crime community, which was not perceived as such by its inhabitants;
- Skeggs’s (1994: 74) study of young working-class women, showing that they were not ‘ideological dupes of both social class and femininity’;
- A. Taylor’s (1993: 8) study of intravenous female drug-users, showing the people she studied are not ‘pathetic, inadequate individuals’ but ‘rational, active people making decisions based on the contingencies of both their drug using careers and their roles and status in society’;
- Armstrong’s (1993: 11) quest in his research on football hooliganism to ‘see beyond mere appearances’ and his finding that, contrary to the popular view, hooligans are not a highly organized group led by a clearly identifiable group of ringleaders;
- O’Reilly’s (2000) ethnography of British expatriates on the Costa del Sol in Spain, in which she shows how the widely held view that this group is deeply dissatisfied with their lives in the sun and long to return is by no means an accurate portrayal in terms of how they view themselves and their situation.

The empathetic stance of seeking to see through the eyes of one's research participants is very much in tune with interpretivism and demonstrates well the epistemological links with phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and *Verstehen*. However, it is not without practical problems. For example: the risk of 'going native' and losing sight of what you are studying (see Key concept 19.3); the problem of how far the researcher should go, such as the potential problem of participating in illegal or dangerous activities, which could be a risk in research like that engaged in by Taylor and Armstrong; and the possibility that the researcher will be able to see through the eyes of only some of the people who form part of a social scene but not others, such as only people of the same gender. These and other practical difficulties will be addressed in the chapters that follow.

Abductive reasoning

Precisely because in much qualitative research the perspectives of those one is studying are the empirical point of departure, many writers argue that the kind of reasoning involved is better described not as inductive reasoning but as *abductive* reasoning (e.g. N. Blaikie 2004a; Charmaz 2006). With **abduction** the researcher grounds a theoretical understanding of the contexts and people he or she is studying in the language, meanings, and perspectives that form their worldview. The crucial step in abduction is that, having described and understood the world from his or her participants' perspectives, the researcher must come to a social scientific account of the social world as seen from those perspectives. Further, arriving at a social scientific account must not lose touch with the world as it is seen by those whose voices provided the data. On the face of it, this looks like an inductive logic, and indeed there is an element of induction in this process. However, what distinguishes abduction is that the theoretical account is grounded in the worldview of those one researches. Abduction is broadly inductive in approach but is worth distinguishing by virtue of its reliance on explanation and understanding on participants' worldviews.

Description and the emphasis on context

Qualitative researchers are much more inclined than quantitative researchers to provide a great deal of descriptive detail when reporting the fruits of their research. This is not to say that they are exclusively concerned with description. They are concerned with explanation, and indeed the extent to which qualitative

researchers ask 'why?' questions is frequently understated. For example, Skeggs (1997: 22) has written that her first question for her research on young working-class women was 'why do women, who are clearly not just victims of some ideological conspiracy, consent to a system of class and gender oppression which appears to offer few rewards and little benefit?' (see Research in focus 19.7 for further details of this study).

Many qualitative studies provide a detailed account of what goes on in the setting being investigated. Very often qualitative studies seem to be full of apparently trivial details. However, these details are frequently important for the qualitative researcher, because of their significance for their subjects and also because the details provide an account of the context within which people's behaviour takes place. It was with this point in mind that Geertz (1973a) recommended the provision of **thick descriptions** of social settings, events, and often individuals. As a result of this emphasis on description, qualitative studies are often full of detailed information about the social worlds being examined. On the surface, some of this detail may appear irrelevant, and, indeed, there is a risk of the researcher becoming too embroiled in descriptive detail. Lofland and Lofland (1995: 164–5), for example, warn against the sin of what they call 'descriptive excess' in qualitative research, whereby the amount of detail overwhelms or inhibits the analysis of data.

One of the main reasons why qualitative researchers are keen to provide considerable descriptive detail is that they typically emphasize the importance of the contextual understanding of social behaviour. This means that behaviour, values, or whatever must be understood in context. This recommendation means that we cannot understand the behaviour of members of a social group other than in terms of the specific environment in which they operate. In this way, behaviour that may appear odd or irrational can make perfect sense when we understand the particular context within which that behaviour takes place. The emphasis on context in qualitative research goes back to many of the classic studies in social anthropology, which often demonstrated how a particular practice, such as the magical ritual that may accompany the sowing of seeds, made little sense unless we understand the belief systems of that society. One of the chief reasons for the emphasis on descriptive detail is that it is often precisely this detail that provides the mapping of context in terms of which behaviour is understood. The propensity for description can also be interpreted as a manifestation of the naturalism that pervades much qualitative research (see Key concept 3.4), because it places a premium on detailed, rich descriptions of social settings.



Research in focus 17.3

Contextual understanding in an ethnographic study of three schools

Swain (2004) conducted an ethnographic study of three junior schools in the UK in the late 1990s. Ethnography is discussed in Chapter 19. Because it compared findings from three schools, this was a multiple-case study, which drew on the strengths of using a comparative design in that it was possible to explore the significance of context across the three schools. The schools were different in terms of the social characteristics of the pupils they recruited: Highwoods Independent's pupils were mainly upper middle class; pupils at Petersfield Junior were predominantly middle class; and Westmoor Abbey Junior's pupils were mainly working class (the school names are pseudonyms). Swain (2004: 169) describes his data-collection methods as involving non-participant observation of pupils in lessons and around the school and 'loosely structured interviews' with pupils based on 'nominated friendship groups'. In this article, Swain was interested in the ways in which boys construct what it means to be masculine in the school and draws primarily on data collected on boys rather than on girls. Swain shows that masculinity was inseparable from the achievement of status among school peer groups and that the body was the means of expressing masculinity. The significance of context emerges in connection with Swain's account of how the body was used to convey masculinity in the three schools: at Highwoods, sport was the medium through which the body expressed masculinity; at Westmoor Abbey, the emphasis was macho and frequently took on a violent tone; and, at Petersfield, it was speed and strength (predominantly in the playground rather than on the sports field). Context reveals itself in the different resources in the three schools that students must draw upon to perform masculinity.

Conducting qualitative research in more than one setting can be helpful in identifying the significance of context and the ways in which it influences behaviour and ways of thinking. Research in focus 17.3 provides an illustration of a multiple-case study that demonstrates this potential.

Emphasis on process

Qualitative research tends to view social life in terms of processes. This tendency reveals itself in a number of different ways. One of the main ways is that there is often a concern to show how events and patterns unfold over time. As a result, qualitative evidence often conveys a strong sense of change and flux. As Pettigrew (1997: 338) usefully puts it, process is 'a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in context'. Qualitative research that is based in ethnographic methods is particularly associated with this emphasis on process (although, ironically, British social anthropology, which is often associated with the early development of ethnographic research, is sometimes thought of as presenting a static picture of social reality by virtue of its association with functionalism). It is the element of participant observation that is a key feature of ethnography that is especially instrumental in generating this feature.

Ethnographers are typically immersed in a social setting for a long time—frequently years. Consequently, they are able to observe the ways in which events develop over time or the ways in which the different elements of a social system (values, beliefs, behaviour, and so on) interconnect. Such findings can inject a sense of process by seeing social life in terms of streams of interdependent events and elements (see Research in focus 17.4 for an example).

This is not to say, however, that ethnographers are the only qualitative researchers who inject a sense of process into our understanding of social life. It can also be achieved through semi-structured and unstructured interviewing, by asking participants to reflect on the processes leading up to or following on from an event. McKee and Bell (1985: 388; see also Thinking deeply 3.3), for example, show, through the use of a 'largely unstructured, conversational interview style' with forty-five couples in which the man was unemployed, the accommodations that are made over time by both husbands and wives to the fact of male unemployment. The various accommodations are not an immediate effect of unemployment but are gradual and incremental responses over time. The life-history approach is an example of a form of qualitative research. One of the best-known studies of this kind is O. Lewis's (1961) study of a poor Mexican family. Lewis carried out extended taped



Research in focus 17.4

Process in (strike) action

Waddington (1994) describes his experiences associated with his participant observation of a strike at the Ansell's brewery in Birmingham in the 1980s. As a participant observer, he was involved in 'attending picket lines, mass meetings and planning discussions, and accompanying the strikers on flying picketing and intelligence gathering manoeuvres' (1994: 113). In addition to observation, he carried out informal interviews and linked these data to other sources, such as 'material deriving from newspaper archives, company and trade union documents, letters and richly detailed minutes of trade union-management meetings' (1994: 115). As a result, he was able to show 'how the contemporary beliefs, values and attitudes of the workforce, and the mutual feelings of animosity and distrust between employees and management, were shaped by a sequence of historical events stretching back over 20 years' (1994: 115). We can see in this example the development of a sense of process in three ways: through observation of the strike over its entirety, so that developments and interconnections between events could be brought out; through connecting these events with historical and other data, so that the links between the strike and previous and other events and actions could be outlined; and through the sketching of the context (in the form of the past, as well as current beliefs and values) and its links with behaviour during the strike.

interviews with the family members to reconstruct their life histories. For his study of disasters in the UK, and in particular of the fire at a holiday leisure complex on the Isle of Man, Turner (1994) employed published documents to arrive at a reconstruction of the events leading up to the fire and a theoretical understanding of those events. Thus, the emphasis on process in qualitative research can be seen in the use of quite different approaches to data collection.

Thus, process may be investigated in real time through participant observation (see Research in focus 17.4 for an example) or, as in the examples described in the previous paragraph, it may be arrived at through retrospective interviewing or through constructing a processual account through the examination of documents.

Flexibility and limited structure

Many qualitative researchers are disdainful of approaches to research that entail the imposition of pre-determined formats on the social world. This position is largely to do with the preference for seeing through the eyes of the people being studied. After all, if a structured method of data collection is employed, since this is bound to be the product of an investigator's ruminations about the object of enquiry, certain decisions must have been made about what he or she expects to find and about the nature of the social reality that would be encountered. Therefore, the researcher is limited in the degree to which he or she can genuinely adopt the worldview of the people being studied. Consequently, most qualitative researchers prefer a research orientation that entails as

little prior contamination of the social world as possible. To do otherwise risks imposing an inappropriate frame of reference on people. Keeping structure to a minimum is supposed to enhance the opportunity of genuinely revealing the perspectives of the people you are studying. Also, in the process, aspects of people's social world that are particularly important to them, but that might not even have crossed the mind of a researcher unacquainted with it, are more likely to be forthcoming. As a result, qualitative research tends to be a strategy that tries not to delimit areas of enquiry too much and to ask fairly general rather than specific research questions (see Thinking deeply 17.2). For example, Dacin, Munir, and Tracey (2010: 1399) justify their selection of a qualitative research approach to investigate whether Cambridge University dining rituals serve to perpetuate the British class system on the grounds that it 'allowed us to build our understanding of the properly contextualized experiences of those involved in the dining ritual, rather than imposing a particular framework upon them'.

Because of the preference for an unstructured approach to the collection of data, qualitative researchers adopt methods of research that do not require the investigator to develop highly specific research questions in advance and therefore to devise instruments specifically for those questions to be answered. Ethnography, with its emphasis on participant observation, is particularly well suited to this orientation. It allows researchers to submerge themselves in a social setting with a fairly general research focus in mind and gradually to formulate a narrower emphasis by making as many observations of that setting as possible. They can then formulate more

specific research questions out of their collected data. Similarly, interviewing is an extremely prominent method in the qualitative researcher's armoury, but it is not of the kind we encountered in the course of most of Chapter 9 —namely, the structured interview. Instead, qualitative researchers prefer less structured approaches to interviewing, as we will see in Chapter 20. Blumer's (1954) argument for sensitizing rather than definitive concepts (that is, the kind employed by quantitative researchers) is symptomatic of the preference for a more open-ended, and hence less structured, approach.

An advantage of the unstructured nature of most qualitative enquiry (that is, in addition to the prospect of gaining access to people's worldviews) is that it offers the prospect of flexibility. The researcher can change direction in the course of his or her investigation much more easily than in quantitative research, which tends to have a built-in momentum once the data collection is under way: if you send out hundreds of postal questionnaires and realize after you have started to get some back that there is an issue that you would have liked to investigate, you are not going to find it easy to retrieve the situation. Structured interviewing and structured observation can involve some flexibility, but the requirement to make interviews as comparable as possible for survey investigations limits the extent to which this can happen. O'Reilly (2000) has written that her research on the British on the Costa del Sol shifted in two ways over the

duration of her participant observation: from an emphasis on the elderly to expatriates of all ages; and from an emphasis on permanent residents to less permanent forms of migration, such as tourism. These changes in emphasis occurred because of the limitations of just focusing on the elderly and on permanent migrants, since these groups were not necessarily as distinctive as might have been supposed. Similarly, Kathleen Gerson has explained that, in her research on changing forms of the family, she conducted an early interview with a young man who had been brought up in his early years in a traditional household that underwent a considerable change during his childhood. This led her to change her focus from an emphasis on family structures to processes of change in the family (Gerson and Horowitz 2002). See Research in focus 17.5 for a further illustration of the ways in which the unstructured data-collection style of qualitative research can be used to suggest alternative avenues of enquiry or ways of thinking about the phenomenon being investigated.

Concepts and theory grounded in data

This issue has already been addressed in much of the exposition of qualitative research above. For qualitative researchers, concepts and theories are usually inductively arrived at from the data that are collected (see Research in focus 17.1 and 17.6).



Research in focus 17.5 Flexibility in action

In the course of a study of young people with learning difficulties using qualitative interviews, C. A. Davies (1999) reports that she found that on many occasions her interviewees mentioned food in the course of conversations. Initially, she followed these conversations up largely in order to establish rapport with these young people. However, she gradually came to realize that in fact food was of considerable significance for her research, because it represented a lens through which her participants viewed their anxieties about the ways people attempted to control them. Food was also a focus for their strategies of resistance to control.



Research in focus 17.6 Emerging concepts

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, most UK universities were in the throes of introducing staff appraisal schemes for both academic and academic-related staff. Staff appraisal is employed to review the appraisee's performance and activities over a period of usually one or two years. Along with some colleagues, I undertook an evaluation of staff appraisal schemes in four universities (Bryman et al. 1994). The research entailed the collection of both

quantitative and qualitative data within the framework of a comparative research design. The qualitative data were derived from large numbers of interviews with appraisers, appraisees, senior managers, and many others. In the course of conducting the interviews and analysing the subsequent data we became increasingly aware of a cynicism among many of the people we interviewed. This attitude revealed itself in several ways, such as: a view that appraisal had been introduced just to pacify the government; a belief that nothing happened of any significance in the aftermath of an appraisal meeting; the view that it was not benefiting universities; and a suggestion that many participants to the appraisal process were just going through the motions. As one of the interviewees said in relation to this last feature: 'It's like going through the motions of it [appraisal]. It's just get it over with and signed and dated and filed and that's the end of it' (quoted in Bryman et al. 1994: 180).

On the basis of these findings, it was suggested that the attitudes towards appraisal and the behaviour of those involved in appraisal were characterized by *procedural compliance*, which was defined as 'a response to an organizational innovation in which the technical requirements of the innovation . . . are broadly adhered to, but where there are substantial reservations about its efficacy and only partial commitment to it, so that there is a tendency for the procedures associated with the innovation to be adhered to with less than a total commitment to its aims' (Bryman et al. 1994: 178).



The critique of qualitative research

In a similar way to the criticisms that have been levelled at quantitative research mainly by qualitative researchers, a parallel critique has been built up of qualitative research. Some of the more common ones follow.

Qualitative research is too subjective

Quantitative researchers sometimes criticize qualitative research as being too impressionistic and subjective. By these criticisms they usually mean that qualitative findings rely too much on the researcher's often unsystematic views about what is significant and important, and also upon the close personal relationships that the researcher frequently strikes up with the people studied. Precisely because qualitative research often begins in a relatively open-ended way and entails a gradual narrowing-down of research questions or problems, the consumer of the writings deriving from the research is given few clues as to why one area was the chosen area upon which attention was focused rather than another. By contrast, quantitative researchers point to the tendency for the problem formulation stage in their work to be more explicitly stated in terms of such matters as the existing literature on that topic and key theoretical ideas.

Difficult to replicate

Quantitative researchers also often argue that these tendencies are even more of a problem because of the

difficulty of replicating a qualitative study, although replication in the social sciences is by no means a straightforward matter regardless of this particular issue (see Chapter 7). Precisely because it is unstructured and often reliant upon the qualitative researcher's ingenuity, it is almost impossible to conduct a true replication, since there are hardly any standard procedures to be followed.

In qualitative research, the investigator him- or herself is the main instrument of data collection, so that what is observed and heard and also what the researcher decides to concentrate upon are very much products of his or her predilections. There are several possible components of this criticism: what qualitative researchers (especially perhaps in ethnography) choose to focus upon while in the field is a product of what strikes them as significant, whereas other researchers are likely to empathize with other issues; the responses of participants (people being observed or interviewed) to qualitative researchers is likely to be affected by the characteristics of the researcher (personality, age, gender, and so on); and, because of the unstructured nature of qualitative data, interpretation will be profoundly influenced by the subjective leanings of a researcher. Because of such factors, it is difficult—not to say impossible—to replicate qualitative findings. The difficulties ethnographers experience when they revisit grounds previously trodden by another researcher (often referred to as a 'restudy') do not inspire confidence in the replicability of qualitative research (Bryman 1994).

Problems of generalization

It is often suggested that the scope of the findings of qualitative investigations is restricted. When participant observation is used or when qualitative interviews are conducted with a small number of individuals in a certain organization or locality, they argue that it is impossible to know how the findings can be generalized to other settings. How can just one or two cases be representative of all cases? In other words, can we really treat Holdaway's (1982) research on the police in Sheffield as representative of all police forces, or Armstrong's (1998) research on Sheffield United supporters as representative of all football supporters, or Waddington's (1994) study of a strike as generalizable to all lengthy strikes? In the case of research based on interviews rather than participation, can we treat interviewees who have not been selected through a probability procedure or even quota sampling as representative? Are A. Taylor's (1993) female intravenous drug-users typical of all members of that category or are Skeggs's (1994; see Research in focus 19.7) young working-class women typical?

The answer in all these cases is, of course, emphatically 'no'. A case study is not a sample of one drawn from a known population. Similarly, the people who are interviewed in qualitative research are not meant to be representative of a population, and indeed, in some cases, like female intravenous drug-users, we may find it more or less impossible to enumerate the population in any precise manner. Instead, the findings of qualitative research are to generalize to theory rather than to populations. It is 'the cogency of the theoretical reasoning' (J. C. Mitchell 1983: 207), rather than statistical criteria, that is decisive in considering the generalizability of the findings of qualitative research. In other words, it is the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made out of qualitative data that is crucial to the assessment of generalization. As noted in Chapter 3, this view of generalization is called 'analytic generalization' by Yin (2009) and 'theoretical generalization' by J. C. Mitchell (1983).

However, not all writers on the issue of generalization in relation to qualitative research (and case study research in particular) accept this view. M. Williams (2000: 215) has argued that, in many cases, qualitative researchers are in a position to produce what he calls *moderatum* generalizations—that is, ones in which aspects of the focus of enquiry (a group of drug-users, a group of football hooligans, a strike) 'can be seen to be instances of a broader set of recognizable features'. In addition, Williams argues that not only is it the case that qualitative researchers *can* make such generalizations but that in fact they often *do* make them. Thus, when generating

findings relating to the hooligans who follow a certain football club, a researcher will often draw comparisons with findings by other researchers relating to comparable groups. Indeed, the researcher may also draw comparisons and linkages with still other groups: followers of other professional sports teams or violent groups that are not linked to sport. When forging such comparisons and linkages, the researcher is engaging in *moderatum* generalization. *Moderatum* generalizations will always be limited and somewhat more tentative than those associated with statistical generalizations of the kind associated with probability sampling (see Chapter 8). On the other hand, they do permit a modicum of generalization and help to counter the view that generalization beyond the immediate evidence and the case is impossible in qualitative research.

These three criticisms reflect many of the preoccupations of quantitative research that were discussed in Chapter 7. A further criticism that is often made of qualitative research, but that is perhaps less influenced by quantitative research criteria, is the suggestion that qualitative research frequently lacks transparency in how the research was conducted.

Lack of transparency

It is sometimes difficult to establish from qualitative research what the researcher actually *did* and how he or she arrived at the study's conclusions. For example, qualitative research reports are sometimes unclear about such matters as how people were chosen for observation or interview. This deficiency contrasts sharply with the sometimes laborious accounts of sampling procedures in reports of quantitative research. However, it does not seem plausible to suggest that outlining in some detail the ways in which research participants are selected constitutes the application of quantitative research criteria. Readers have a right to know how far research participants were selected to correspond to a wide range of people. Also, the process of qualitative data analysis is frequently unclear (Bryman and Burgess 1994a). It is often not obvious how the analysis was conducted—in other words, what the researcher was actually doing when the data were analysed and therefore how the study's conclusions were arrived at. To a large extent, these areas of a lack of transparency are increasingly being addressed by qualitative researchers. It is striking that when O'Cathain et al. (2008) examined issues of quality in mixed methods research in the health services field, the qualitative methods were more likely not to be described fully (and sometimes not at all) than the quantitative components.



Is it always like this?

This was a heading that was employed in Chapter 7 in relation to quantitative research, but it is perhaps less easy to answer in relation to qualitative research. To a large extent, this is because qualitative research is less codified than quantitative research—that is, it is less influenced by strict guidelines and directions about how to go about data collection and analysis. As a result, and this may be noticed by readers of the chapters that follow this one, accounts of qualitative research are frequently less prescriptive in tone than those encountered in relation to quantitative research. Instead, they often exhibit more of a descriptive tenor, outlining the different ways qualitative researchers have gone about research or suggesting alternative ways of conducting research or analysis based on the writer's own experiences or those of others. To a large extent, this picture is changing, in that there is a growing number of books that seek to make clear-cut recommendations about how qualitative research should be carried out.

However, if we look at some of the preoccupations of qualitative research that were described above, we can see certain ways in which there are departures from the practices that are implied by these preoccupations. One of the main departures is that qualitative research is sometimes a lot more focused than is implied by the suggestion that the researcher begins with general research questions and narrows it down so that theory and concepts are arrived at during and after the data collection. There is no *necessary* reason why qualitative research cannot be employed to investigate a specific research problem. For example, Hammersley et al. (1985) describe a study that was designed to explore the impact of external assessments on schools. More specifically, they wanted to examine the contention, which was based on other studies of schools, that 'external examinations lead

to lecturing and note-taking on the part of secondary-school teachers and instrumental attitudes among their pupils' (Hammersley et al. 1985: 58). This contention was examined through a comparison of two schools that varied considerably in the emphasis they placed on examinations. This study exhibits a comparative research design (see Chapter 3), with its accent on a comparison of two cases. However, at the same time that qualitative research is sometimes more focused than is implied by the suggestion that it begins with general research questions, it is sometimes more open-ended and unfocused than this suggests. As noted in Thinking deeply 17.2, some grounded theory practitioners advocate beginning with a blank slate so that theoretical ideas emerge out of the data. However, grounded theory practitioners are not alone in this approach, for it is by no means uncommon for qualitative researchers to begin with a general focus. For example, Barley and Kunda's (2004) ethnography of technical contractors does not appear to have any research questions but seeks instead to shed light on the world of these contractors and to demonstrate the implications of some of their findings for issues in the sociology of work.

A further way in which qualitative research differs from the standard model is in connection with the notion of a lack of structure in approaches to collecting and analysing data. As will be seen in Chapter 22, techniques like conversation analysis entail the application of a highly codified method for analysing talk. Moreover, the growing use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (**CAQDAS**), which will be the subject of Chapter 25, is leading to greater transparency in the procedures used for analysing qualitative data. This greater transparency may be leading to greater codification in qualitative data analysis than has previously been the case.



Some contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research

Several writers have explored the contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research by devising tables that allow the differences to be brought out (e.g.

Halfpenny 1979; Bryman 1988a; Hammersley 1992b). Table 17.1 attempts to draw out the chief contrasting features:

- *Numbers vs Words.* Quantitative researchers are often portrayed as preoccupied with applying measurement procedures to social life, while qualitative researchers are seen as using words in the presentation of analyses of society.
- *Point of view of researcher vs Point of view of participants.* In quantitative research, the investigator is in the driving seat. The set of concerns that he or she brings to an investigation structures the investigation. In qualitative research, the perspective of those being studied—what they see as important and significant—provides the point of orientation.
- *Researcher is distant vs Researcher is close.* This dimension is to do with the relationship between researchers and their research participants. In quantitative research, researchers are uninvolved with their subjects and in some cases, as in research based on postal questionnaires or on hired interviewers, may have no contact with them at all. Sometimes, this lack of a relationship with the subjects of an investigation is regarded as desirable by quantitative researchers, because they feel that their objectivity might be compromised if they become too involved with the people they study. The qualitative researcher seeks close involvement with the people being investigated, so that he or she can genuinely understand the world through their eyes.
- *Theory and concepts tested in research vs Theory and concepts emergent from data.* Quantitative researchers typically bring a set of concepts to bear on the research instruments being employed, so that theoretical work precedes the collection of data, whereas in qualitative research concepts and theoretical elaboration emerge out of data collection.
- *Static vs Process.* Quantitative research is frequently depicted as presenting a static image of social reality with its emphasis on relationships between variables. Change and connections between events over time tend not to surface, other than in a mechanistic fashion. Qualitative research is often depicted as attuned to the unfolding of events over time and to the interconnections between the actions of participants of social settings.
- *Structured vs Unstructured.* Quantitative research is typically highly structured, so that the investigator is able to examine the precise concepts and issues that are the focus of the study; in qualitative research the approach is invariably unstructured, so that the possibility of getting at actors' meanings and of concepts emerging out of data collection is enhanced.
- *Generalization vs Contextual understanding.* Whereas quantitative researchers want their findings to be generalizable to the relevant population, the qualitative researcher seeks an understanding of behaviour, values, beliefs, and so on in terms of the context in which the research is conducted.
- *Hard, reliable data vs Rich, deep data.* Quantitative data are often depicted as 'hard' in the sense of being robust and unambiguous, owing to the precision offered by measurement. Qualitative researchers claim, by contrast, that their contextual approach and their often prolonged involvement in a setting engender rich data.
- *Macro vs Micro.* Quantitative researchers are often depicted as involved in uncovering large-scale social trends and connections between variables, whereas qualitative researchers are seen as being concerned with small-scale aspects of social reality, such as interaction.
- *Behaviour vs Meaning.* It is sometimes suggested that the quantitative researcher is concerned with people's behaviour and the qualitative researcher with the meaning of action.
- *Artificial settings vs Natural settings.* Whereas quantitative researchers conduct research in a contrived context, qualitative researchers investigate people in natural environments.

Table 17.1

Some common contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research

Quantitative	Qualitative
Numbers	Words
Point of view of researcher	Points of view of participants
Researcher distant	Researcher close
Theory testing	Theory emergent
Static	Process
Structured	Unstructured
Generalization	Contextual understanding
Hard, reliable data	Rich, deep data
Macro	Micro
Behaviour	Meaning
Artificial settings	Natural settings

However, as we will see in Chapter 26, while these contrasts depict reasonably well the differences between quantitative and qualitative research, they should not be viewed as constituting hard-and-fast distinctions. As I show there, qualitative research can be employed to test theories, while quantitative research is often a good deal more exploratory than is typically assumed. Indeed, the section on 'Reverse operationism' in Chapter 7 implies that in quantitative research concepts often emerge out of the data that are collected (see page 180). Also, it is by no means always appropriate to characterize

qualitative researchers as collecting their data in natural (rather than artificial) settings. This may be an appropriate depiction of research that entails participant observation, but a lot of qualitative research involves interviewing and interviews do not constitute natural settings, even though the interviews tend to be less structured than in survey research. Further, quantitative and qualitative research are not so poles apart that they cannot be combined, as the discussion in Chapter 27 of mixed methods research implies.



Some similarities between quantitative and qualitative research

It is also worth bearing in mind the ways in which quantitative and qualitative research are *similar* rather than different. Hardy and Bryman (2004) have pointed out that, although there clearly are differences between quantitative and qualitative research, it should also be recognized that there are similarities too. They draw attention to the following points:

- *Both are concerned with data reduction.* Both quantitative and qualitative researchers collect large amounts of data. These large amounts of data represent a problem for researchers, because they then have to distil the data. By reducing the amount of data, they can then begin to make sense of the data. In quantitative research, the process of data reduction takes the form of statistical analysis—something like a mean or a frequency table is a way of reducing the amount of data on large numbers of people. In qualitative data analysis, as will be seen in Chapter 24, qualitative researchers develop concepts out of their often rich data.
- *Both are concerned with answering research questions.* Although the nature of the kinds of research questions asked in quantitative and qualitative research are typically different (more specific in quantitative research, more open-ended in qualitative research), they are both fundamentally concerned with answering questions about the nature of social reality.
- *Both are concerned with relating data analysis to the research literature.* Both quantitative and qualitative researchers are typically concerned to relate their findings to points thrown up by the literature relating to the topics on which they work. In other words, the researcher's findings take on significance in large part when they are related to the literature.
- *Both are concerned with variation.* In different ways, both quantitative and qualitative researchers seek to uncover and then to represent the variation that they uncover. This means that both groups of researchers are keen to explore how people (or whatever the unit of analysis is) differ and to explore some of the factors connected to that variation, although, once again, the *form* that the variation takes differs.
- *Both treat frequency as a springboard for analysis.* In quantitative research, frequency is a core outcome of collecting data, as the investigator typically wants to reveal the relative frequency with which certain types of behaviour occur or how many newspaper articles emphasize a certain issue in their articles. In qualitative research, issues of frequency arise in the fact that, in reports of findings in publications, terms like 'often' or 'most' are commonly employed. Also, when analysing qualitative data, the frequency with which certain themes occur commonly acts as a catalyst for which ones tend to be emphasized when writing up findings.
- *Both seek to ensure that deliberate distortion does not occur.* Very few social researchers nowadays subscribe to the view that it is possible to be an entirely objective dispassionate student of social life. Further, sometimes researchers can be partisan (see Chapter 6). However, that does not imply that 'anything goes'. In particular, researchers seek to ensure that 'wilful bias' (Hammersley and Gomm 2000) or what Hardy and Bryman (2004: 7) call 'consciously motivated misrepresentation' does not occur.

- *Both argue for the importance of transparency.* Both quantitative and qualitative researchers seek to be clear about their research procedures and how their findings were arrived at. This allows others to judge the quality and importance of their work. In the past, it has sometimes been suggested that qualitative researchers could be opaque about how they went about their investigations, but increasingly transparency surfaces as an expectation.
- *Both must address the question of error.* In Chapter 9, the significance of error for quantitative research (or, more specifically, survey research) and steps that can be taken to reduce its likelihood were introduced. For the quantitative researcher, error must be reduced as far as possible so that variation that is uncovered is real variation and not the product of problems with how questions are asked or how research instruments

are administered. In qualitative research, the investigator seeks to reduce error by ensuring that, for example, there is a good fit between his or her concepts and the evidence that has been amassed.

- *Research methods should be appropriate to the research questions.* This point is not addressed by Hardy and Bryman (2004), but a further issue is that both groups of researchers seek to ensure that, when they specify research questions, they select research methods and approaches to the analysis of data that are appropriate to those questions.

These tend to be rather general points of similarity, but they are an important corrective to any view that portrays them as completely different. There *are* differences between quantitative and qualitative research but that is not to say that there are no points of similarity.



Feminism and qualitative research

A further dimension that could have been included in the section on 'Some contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research' is that, in the view of some writers, qualitative research is associated with a feminist sensitivity, and that, by implication, quantitative research is viewed by many feminists as incompatible with feminism. This issue was briefly signposted in Chapter 2. The link between feminism and qualitative research is by no means a cut-and-dried issue, in that, although it became something of an orthodoxy among some writers, it has not found favour with all feminists. Indeed, there are signs at the time of writing that views on the issue are changing.

The notion that there is an affinity between feminism and qualitative research has at least two main components to it: a view that quantitative research is inherently incompatible with feminism, and a view that qualitative research provides greater opportunity for a feminist sensitivity to come to the fore. Quantitative research is frequently viewed as incompatible with feminism for the following reasons.

- According to Mies (1993), quantitative research suppresses the voices of women either by ignoring them or by submerging them in a torrent of facts and statistics.
- The criteria of valid knowledge associated with quantitative research are ones that turn women, when they are the focus of research, into objects. This means that women are again subjected to exploitation, in that knowledge and experience are extracted from them with nothing in return, even when the research is conducted by women (Mies 1993).
- The emphasis on controlling variables further exacerbates this last problem, and indeed the very idea of control is viewed as a masculine approach.
- The use of predetermined categories in quantitative research results in an emphasis on what is already known and consequently in 'the silencing of women's own voices' (Maynard 1998: 18).
- The criteria of valid knowledge associated with quantitative research also mean that women are to be researched in a value-neutral way, when in fact the goals of feminist research should be to conduct research specifically *for* women.
- It is sometimes suggested that the quest for universal laws is inconsistent with feminism's emphasis on the situated nature of social reality, which is seen as embedded in the various social identities (based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and so on) that are unique to individuals (Miner-Rubino et al. 2007).

By contrast, qualitative research has been viewed by many feminists as either more compatible with feminism's central tenets or as more capable of being adapted to those tenets. Thus, in contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research allows:

- women's voices to be heard;
- exploitation to be reduced by giving as well as receiving in the course of fieldwork;
- women *not* to be treated as objects to be controlled by the researcher's technical procedures; and
- the emancipatory goals of feminism to be realized. For example, Skeggs (2001: 429) has observed that one of the earliest principles on which feminist research was based was that it should 'alleviate the conditions of oppression'.

How qualitative research achieves these goals will be addressed particularly in relation to the next four chapters, since the issues and arguments vary somewhat from one method to the other. Skeggs (2001: 429–30) argues that the political goals of feminist research led to a preference for qualitative research 'to focus on women's experience and to listen and explore the shared meanings between women with an aim to reformulate traditional research agendas'. However, there are risks with this prioritization of women's experience. In feminist standpoint epistemology, a perspective that places a particular emphasis on experience from the standpoint of women, this prioritization is especially pronounced. However, as Letherby (2003: 46) has suggested, this position 'can and has been used to replace male supremacy with female supremacy and [to] support binary oppositions'. She suggests that, for many analysts, this is likely to be viewed as an unhelpful position to take.



Student experience

Feminism and the research relationship

For Erin Sanders, the prospect of using a feminist approach drawing on qualitative research was attractive in terms of her personal value commitments. However, as this passage shows, she recognized that there are dilemmas and that the issue of feminist research being less exploitative than other approaches should not be exaggerated.

A number of ethical questions emerged reinterviewing sex workers. Because I was employing feminist methodologies . . . I wanted to truly engage with the women that I spoke to, rather than employing a more positivist methodology that would mandate a sense of distance. I felt that feminist methodologies would allow a more balanced research experience—and would enable me to share information about myself to help offset the inherent power imbalance in the research relationship. However, it became evident to me that, employing a variety of 'traditional' feminist methodologies, there was still a power differential. I had hoped to avoid exploiting the women I interviewed for my own personal gain, but I am not sure that this actually happened. I'm not sure that it is ever possible to overcome the power imbalance in the research relationship, especially when I, as a 'White', 'Western' woman, research an 'Other'. From an ethical perspective, it seems to me that the research relationship fosters an exploitative relationship in a number of ways, and I will have to seriously consider how (or if) I can avoid these in future.



To read more about Erin's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/brymansrm4/

In fact, the issue of qualitative research as providing the opportunity for a feminist approach has somewhat different aspects when looking at ethnography, qualitative interviewing, and focus groups—the topics of Chapters 19–21. However, it ought also to be recognized that there has been a softening of attitude among some feminist writers towards quantitative research in recent years. Examples of this softening are as follows.

- There is a recognition that many of the worst excesses of discrimination against women might not have come to light so clearly were it not for the collection and analysis of statistics revealing discrimination (Maynard 1994; Oakley 1998). The very presence of factual evidence of this kind has allowed the case for equal opportunities legislation to be made much more sharply, although, needless to say, there is much more that still needs to be done in this field.

- Quantitative research can be enlisted as an aid to implementing social change for feminists. Miner-Rubino et al. (2007) suggest that knowing about the distribution of attitudes and behaviour in a sample can be used to establish the most appropriate course of action for social change.
- J. Scott (2010) has observed that one reason why qualitative research has tended to be preferred among many feminist researchers is that they have tended to be interested in women's experiences. Qualitative research is well attuned to such study. However, this represents only part of the picture when it comes to understanding inequalities, because investigating the experience of gender inequality and discrimination neglects the wider picture of the wider social structures in which those experiences are embedded. Also needed is large-scale quantitative evidence of the extent and form of gender inequality and discrimination. She shows how survey evidence can do this. For example, discussing one set of data, she shows that, 'although overall there has been a decrease in the downward mobility of women across childbirth, if women have longer breaks out of the work force or return after childbirth to a part-time job, the occupational penalties in terms of downward mobility have increased over time' (J. Scott 2010: 229). Such evidence can be of considerable significance from a feminist perspective, even though in itself it does not address women's experiences. What is crucial is that the research questions that drive a feminist quantitative project are informed by a feminist perspective.
- As Jayaratne and Stewart (1991) and Maynard (1994, 1998) have pointed out, at the very least it is difficult to see why feminist research that combines quantitative and qualitative research would be incompatible with the feminist cause.
- There has also been a recognition of the fact that qualitative research is not *ipso facto* feminist in orientation. If, for example, ethnography, which is covered in Chapter 19, provided for a feminist sensitivity, we would expect fields like social anthropology, which have been virtually founded on the approach, to be almost inherently feminist, which is patently not the case (Reinharz 1992: 47–8). If this is so, the question of appropriate approaches to feminist research would seem to reside in the *application* of methods rather than something that is inherent in them. Consequently, some writers have preferred to write about *feminist research practice* rather than about *feminist methods* (Maynard 1998: 128).

These issues will be returned to in Chapters 19–21.



Key points

- There is disagreement over what precisely qualitative research is.
- Qualitative research does not lend itself to the delineation of a clear set of linear steps.
- It tends to be a more open-ended research strategy than is typically the case with quantitative research.
- Theories and concepts are viewed as outcomes of the research process.
- There is considerable unease about the simple application of the reliability and validity criteria associated with quantitative research to qualitative research. Indeed, some writers prefer to use alternative criteria that have parallels with reliability and validity.
- Most qualitative researchers reveal a preference for seeing through the eyes of research participants.
- Several writers have depicted qualitative research as having a far greater affinity with a feminist standpoint than quantitative research can exhibit.



Questions for review

- What are some of the difficulties with providing a general account of the nature of qualitative research?
- Outline some of the traditions of qualitative research.
- How compelling is Denzin and Lincoln's (2005b) marking-out of distinct 'moments' in the history of qualitative research?
- What are some of the main research methods associated with qualitative research?

The main steps in qualitative research

- Does a research question in qualitative research have the same significance and characteristics as in quantitative research?

Theory and research

- Is the approach to theory in qualitative research inductive or deductive?

Concepts in qualitative research

- What is the difference between definitive and sensitizing concepts?

Reliability and validity in qualitative research

- How have some writers adapted the notions of reliability and validity to qualitative research?
- Why have some writers sought alternative criteria for the evaluation of qualitative research?
- Evaluate Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria.
- Would it be useful to develop quality criteria into checklists?
- What is respondent validation?
- What is triangulation?

The main preoccupations of qualitative researchers

- Outline the main preoccupations of qualitative researchers.
- How do these preoccupations differ from those of quantitative researchers, which were considered in Chapter 7?

The critique of qualitative research

- What are some of the main criticisms that are frequently levelled at qualitative research?
- To what extent do these criticisms reflect the preoccupations of quantitative research?

Is it always like this?

- Can qualitative research be employed in relation to hypothesis testing?

Some contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research

- 'The difference between quantitative and qualitative research revolves entirely around the concern with numbers in the former and with words in the latter.' How far do you agree with this statement?

Some similarities between quantitative and qualitative research

- Does it make sense to describe quantitative and qualitative research as being characterized by both differences *and* similarities?

Feminism and qualitative research

- Why have many feminist researchers preferred qualitative research?
- Is there no role for quantitative research in relation to feminist research?

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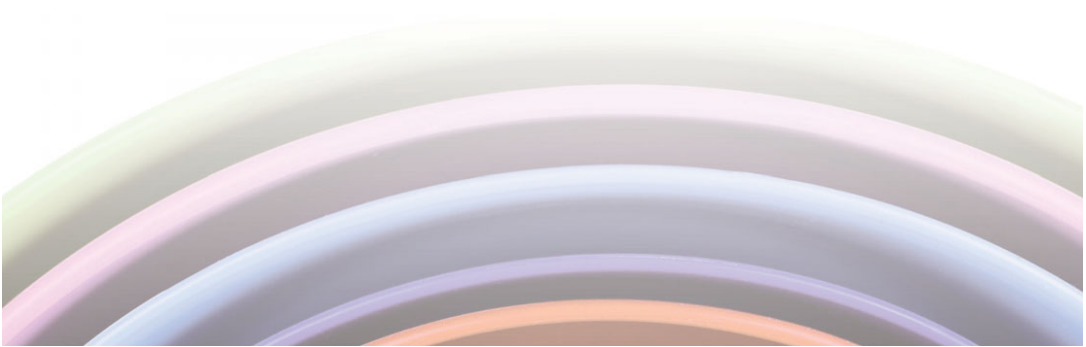
Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of the nature of qualitative research. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.

18

Sampling in qualitative research

Chapter outline

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Chapter guide

This chapter outlines some of the main ways of thinking about conducting sampling in qualitative research. Whereas, in survey research, there is an emphasis on probability sampling, qualitative researchers tend to emphasize the importance of *purposive sampling* for their work. Purposive sampling places the investigator's research questions at the heart of the sampling considerations. This chapter explores:

- the significance of a consideration of levels of sampling;
- the nature of purposive sampling and the reasons for the emphasis on it among many qualitative researchers;
- theoretical sampling, which is a key ingredient of the grounded theory approach, and the nature of theoretical saturation, which is one of the main elements of this sampling strategy;
- the importance of not assuming that theoretical and purposive sampling are the same thing;
- the generic purposive sampling approach as a means of distinguishing theoretical sampling from purposive sampling in general;
- the use of more than one sampling approach in qualitative research.

Introduction

In much the same way that, in quantitative research, the discussion of sampling revolves around **probability sampling**, discussions of sampling in qualitative research tend to revolve around the notion of **purposive sampling** (see Key concept 18.1). This type of sampling is essentially to do with the selection of units (which may be people, organizations, documents, departments, and so on), with direct reference to the research questions being asked. The idea is that the research questions should give an indication of what units need to be sampled. Research questions are likely to provide guidelines as to what categories of people (or whatever the unit of analysis is) need to be the focus of attention and therefore sampled. In this chapter, purposive sampling will act as the master concept around which different sampling approaches in qualitative research can be distinguished.

Probability sampling may be used in qualitative research, though it is more likely to occur in interview-based rather than in ethnographic qualitative studies. There is no obvious rule of thumb that might be used to help the qualitative researcher in deciding when it might be appropriate to employ probability sampling, but two criteria might be envisaged. First, if it is highly significant

or important for the qualitative researcher to be able to generalize to a wider population, probability sampling is likely to be a more compelling sampling approach. This might occur when the audience for one's work is one for whom generalizability in the traditional sense of the word is important. Second, if the research questions do not suggest that particular categories of people (or whatever the unit of analysis is) should be sampled, there may be a case for sampling randomly.

However, probability sampling is rarely used in qualitative research. In many cases, it is not feasible, because of the constraints of ongoing fieldwork and also because it can be difficult and often impossible to map 'the population' from which a random sample might be taken—that is, to create a sampling frame. However, the reason why qualitative researchers rarely seek to generate random samples is not due to these technical constraints but because, like researchers basing their investigations on qualitative interviewing, they typically want to ensure that they gain access to as wide a range of individuals relevant to their research questions as possible, so that many different perspectives and ranges of activity are the focus of attention.



Levels of sampling

Writers on sampling in qualitative research sometimes provide lists of the different sampling approaches that may be found (see Key concept 18.2 for some of the main types that are frequently identified). While these are useful, they sometimes intermingle two different levels of sampling, an issue that is particularly relevant to the consideration of sampling in qualitative research based on single case study or multiple case study designs. With such research designs, the researcher must first select the case or cases; subsequently, the researcher must sample units within the case. When sampling contexts or cases, qualitative researchers have a number of principles of purposive sampling on which to draw. To a significant extent, the ideas and principles behind these were introduced in Chapter 3 in connection with the different types of case, particularly following Yin's (2009) classification. An example is a study by Savage et al. (2005) of the ways in which people retain a sense of place in the face of growing globalization. The authors sampled four areas in the Greater Manchester area and then sampled households within each of the four areas. In fact, in this research there are three levels. First, the authors justify their selection of Manchester as a site for the examination of globalization and a sense of local belonging by showing that it 'exemplifies the tensions and ambivalences of globalization itself' (Savage et al. 2005: 14). In terms of the categorization of types of case presented in Chapter 3, Manchester is therefore an exemplifying case. Subsequently, there were two levels of sampling: of contexts and then of participants.

1. Sampling of context. The researchers 'selected four contrasting residential areas in and around Manchester, whose residents had different combinations of economic and/or cultural capital and we deliberately did not seek to examine those in poor or working-class areas' (Savage et al. 2005: 15). The four sampled areas—Cheadle, Chorlton, Ramsbottom, and Wilmslow—were therefore purposively selected in line with the researchers' focus on local belonging in an era of globalization. Each is an exemplifying case in its own right, since the four areas 'were chosen to exemplify different kinds of social mix' (Savage et al. 2005: 17). The areas were sampled on the basis of

statistical data and the researchers' 'local investigations'. We see here a common strategy when sampling for multiple case studies: sampling for both heterogeneity (the different social mixes of the four areas) and homogeneity (all within Greater Manchester and therefore a common heritage).

2. Sampling of participants. Savage et al. write that they sought to generate a sample within each area that exemplified the population under consideration. Using the electoral register as a sampling frame, they sampled 1 in 3 of certain streets and then arranged interviews with individuals in households. They interviewed 186 people across the 4 areas using a semi-structured interview guide, achieving a 34 per cent response rate. Their sampling strategy allowed them to examine similarities and differences among interviewees within each area and between areas.

The sampling of areas and then participants is a common strategy in qualitative research. It can be seen in the research by Butler and Robson (2001), covered in Research in focus 2.1, which entailed sampling three London areas and then interviewees within each. In this way, there were two levels of purposive sampling: of contexts/cases (that is, the areas) and of 'gentrifiers'. It can also be seen in Swain's (2004) ethnographic study of friendship groups in schools that was examined in Research in focus 17.3. In this research, it was important for him to study the construction of masculinity in schools of contrasting socio-economic background. Since his research question implied that the construction of masculinity draws on the cultural resources that are available in a setting, it was important to demonstrate the operation of this process of social construction by exploring different social settings, since the cultural resources would be different in each setting. Since friendship groups were likely to be important contexts within which masculinities were constructed and reinforced, the sampling of students for interview was implemented by drawing on nominated friendship groups. In this research, there were two levels of sampling—of contexts/cases (that is, the schools) and then of participants (that is, of students).



Purposive sampling

Most sampling in qualitative research entails purposive sampling of some kind. What links the various kinds of purposive sampling approach is that the sampling is conducted with reference to the goals of the research, so that

units of analysis are selected in terms of criteria that will allow the research questions to be answered. This term is explained in Key concept 18.1.



Key concept 18.1

What is purposive sampling?

Purposive sampling is a non-probability form of sampling. The researcher does not seek to sample research participants on a random basis. The goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases/participants in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed. Very often, the researcher will want to sample in order to ensure that there is a good deal of variety in the resulting sample, so that sample members differ from each other in terms of key characteristics relevant to the research question. Because it is a non-probability sampling approach, purposive sampling does not allow the researcher to generalize to a population. Although a purposive sample is not a random sample, it is not a convenience sample either (see Chapter 8 on convenience sampling). A convenience sample is simply available by chance to the researcher, whereas in purposive sampling the researcher samples with his or her research goals in mind. In purposive sampling, sites, like organizations, and people (or whatever the unit of analysis is) within sites are selected because of their relevance to the research questions. The researcher needs to be clear in his or her mind what the criteria are that will be relevant to the inclusion or exclusion of units of analysis (whether the 'units' are sites, people, or something else). Examples of purposive sampling in qualitative research are theoretical sampling (see Key concept 18.3) and snowball sampling (see Research in focus 18.2 for an example). In quantitative research, quota sampling is a form of purposive sampling procedure.

In order to contextualize the discussion, I will draw on two useful distinctions that have been employed in relation to purposive sampling. First, Teddlie and Yu (2007) distinguish a sampling approach that they refer to as sequential sampling, which implies a distinction between sequential and non-sequential approaches. Non-sequential approaches to sampling might be termed 'fixed sampling strategies'. With a sequential approach, sampling is an evolving process in that the researcher usually begins with an initial sample and gradually adds to the sample as befits the research questions. Units are selected by virtue of their relevance to the research questions, and the sample is gradually added to as the investigation evolves. With a fixed purposive sampling strategy, the sample is more or less established at the outset of the research, and there is little or no adding to the sample as the research proceeds. The research questions guide the sampling approach, but the sample is more or less fixed early on in the research process.

Second, Hood (2007) distinguishes between a priori and contingent sampling approaches. A purposive sampling approach is contingent when the criteria for sampling units of analysis evolve over the course of the research. The research questions again guide the sampling of participants, but the relevant sampling criteria shift over the course of the research as the research questions change or multiply. With an a priori purposive sample, the criteria for selecting participants are established at the outset of the research. The criteria will again be ones that are designed to answer the research questions, but the criteria do not evolve as the research progresses.

Theoretical sampling

One form of purposive sampling is **theoretical sampling** (see Key concept 18.3), advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) in the context of an approach to qualitative data analysis they developed



Key concept 18.2

Some purposive sampling approaches

The following is a list of some prominent types of purposive sample that have been identified by writers such as Patton (1990) and Pals (2008):

1. *Extreme or deviant case sampling.* Sampling cases that are unusual or that are unusually at the far end(s) of a particular dimension of interest.
2. *Typical case sampling.* Sampling a case because it exemplifies a dimension of interest.
3. *Critical case sampling.* Sampling a crucial case that permits a logical inference about the phenomenon of interest—for example, a case might be chosen precisely because it is anticipated that it might allow a theory to be tested.
4. *Maximum variation sampling.* Sampling to ensure as wide a variation as possible in terms of the dimension of interest.
5. *Criterion sampling.* Sampling all units (cases or individuals) that meet a particular criterion.
6. *Theoretical sampling.* See Key concept 18.3.
7. *Snowball sampling.* See Research in focus 18.2.
8. *Opportunistic sampling.* Capitalizing on opportunities to collect data from certain individuals, contact with whom is largely unforeseen but who may provide data relevant to the research question.
9. *Stratified purposive sampling.* Sampling of usually typical cases or individuals within subgroups of interest.

The first three purposive sampling approaches are ones that are particularly likely to be employed in connection with the selection of cases or contexts. The others are likely to be used in connection with the sampling of individuals as well as cases or contexts.



Key concept 18.3

What is theoretical sampling?

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967: 45), theoretical sampling 'is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is *controlled* by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal.' This definition conveys a crucial characteristic of theoretical sampling—namely, that it is an ongoing process rather than a distinct and single stage, as it is, for example, in probability sampling. Moreover, it is important to realize that it is not just people who are the 'objects' of sampling, as can be seen in a more recent definition: 'Data gathering driven by concepts derived from the evolving theory and based on the concept of "making comparisons", whose purpose is to go to places, people, or events that will maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions' (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 201). For Charmaz (2000: 519), theoretical sampling is a 'defining property of grounded theory' and is concerned with the refinement of the theoretical categories that emerge in the course of analysing data that have been collected, rather than boosting sample size. Theoretical sampling differs from generic purposive sampling, which is outlined below, in that its practitioners emphasize using it to provide a springboard for the generation of theory and the refinement of theoretical categories. It is iterative in the sense that it is not a one off but an ongoing process that entails several stages. It emphasizes **theoretical saturation** (see Key concept 18.4) as a criterion for deciding when to cease collecting new data on a particular theoretical idea and to move on to the investigation of some ramifications of the emerging theory.

known as grounded theory. In Glaser and Strauss's view, because of its reliance on statistical rather than theoretical criteria, probability sampling is not appropriate to qualitative research. Theoretical sampling is meant to be an alternative strategy. As they put it: 'Theoretical sampling is done in order to discover categories and their properties and to suggest the interrelationships into a theory. Statistical sampling is done to obtain accurate evidence on distributions of people among categories to be used in descriptions and verifications' (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 62). What distinguishes theoretical sampling from other sampling approaches is the emphasis on the selection of cases and units with reference to the quest for the generation of a theoretical understanding. Figure 18.1 outlines the main steps in theoretical sampling.

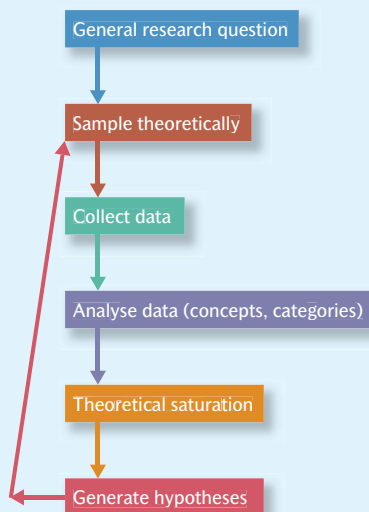
In grounded theory, you carry on collecting data (observing, interviewing, collecting documents) through theoretical sampling until **theoretical saturation** (see Key concept 18.4) has been achieved. This means that: successive interviews/observations have both formed the basis for the creation of a category and confirmed

its importance; there is no need to continue with data collection in relation to that category or cluster of categories; instead, the researcher should move on and generate hypotheses out of the categories that are building up and then move on to collecting data in relation to these hypotheses. As Charmaz (2006) puts it, when new data no longer stimulate new theoretical understandings or new dimensions of the principal theoretical categories, the relevant categories are saturated. Proponents of grounded theory argue that there is a great deal of redundancy in statistical sampling. For example, committing yourself to interviewing x per cent of an organization's members may mean that you end up wasting time and resources because you could have confirmed the significance of a concept and/or its connections with other concepts by using a much smaller sample. Instead, grounded theory advocates that you sample in terms of what is relevant to and meaningful for your theory. The key is to ensure you sample so as to test your emerging theoretical ideas. The approach is supposed to be an iterative one—that is, one in which there is a movement backwards and forwards between sampling and theoretical reflection, but it may be that the researcher feels that his or her categories achieve theoretical saturation (see Key concept 18.4) at a relatively early stage. For example, for their research on organization dress, which is referred to in Research in focus 20.7, Rafaeli et al. (1997: 14) employed initially a stratified random sampling approach (see above), but then evaluated their data 'after completing interviews with the 20 individuals selected and concluded that, because we had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967), no additional interviews were necessary'. The use of theoretical saturation as a criterion for deciding when to cease further sampling does not necessarily imply that a theoretical sampling approach has been employed. This is suggested by the quotation from Rafaeli et al., where there is no suggestion of an iterative movement between sampling and theory development. What we see here is an approach that is more redolent of what I call below a generic purposive sampling approach than of theoretical sampling.

A sampling approach that is more in tune with Glaser and Strauss's (1967) idea of theoretical sampling is provided by Finch and Mason's (1990) account of their Family Obligations Project (see Research in focus 18.1). The chief virtue of theoretical sampling is that the emphasis is upon using theoretical reflection on data as the guide to whether more data are needed. It therefore places a premium on theorizing rather than the statistical adequacy of a sample, which may be a limited guide to sample selection in many instances.

Figure 18.1

The process of theoretical sampling





Key concept 18.4

What is theoretical saturation?

The key idea is that you carry on sampling theoretically until a category has been saturated with data. 'This means, until (a) no new or relevant data seem to be emerging regarding a category, (b) the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, and (c) the relationships among categories are well established and validated' (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 212). In the language of grounded theory, a category operates at a somewhat higher level of abstraction than a concept in that it may group together several concepts that have common features denoted by the category. Saturation does not mean, as is sometimes suggested, that the researcher develops a sense of *déjà vu* when listening to what people say in interviews but that new data no longer suggest new insights into an emergent theory or no longer suggest new dimensions of theoretical categories.



Research in focus 18.1

Theoretical sampling in a study of family obligations

Finch and Mason's (1990: 26) Family Obligations Project was a study of 'patterns of support, aid and assistance . . . between adult kin' in Manchester. Initially, survey research, using a structured interview, was conducted and yielded nearly 1,000 completed interviews. A sample of these interviewees was then approached to be interviewed by semi-structured interview. The initial sample for this phase of the investigation was selected purposively—that is, with specific target subgroups in mind. These were divorced and/or remarried people and the youngest group at the time of the survey (18–24 years of age). Their rationale for this purposive selection is as follows: 'Since fieldwork was principally to be concerned with understanding the process of negotiation between relatives, we decided that it would be much more useful to focus upon individuals who might currently or recently have been involved in processes of negotiation and renegotiation of family relationships' (1990: 33).

Finch and Mason sampled 5 at a time from the total of each of these subgroups who were willing to be interviewed again (112 in the divorced/remarried subgroup and 117 young adults). Individuals were sampled using random numbers. In addition, the authors wanted to interview the kin groups of individuals from the initial social survey as providing examples of 'negotiations between relatives over issues concerning financial or material support' (1990: 38). They decided to conduct two further interviews with the focal person in a negotiation over family obligations and one interview with each of that person's relatives. However, the sampling strategy was based on the selection not of individuals as cases but of *situations*. In order to make the data comparable, they searched out individuals and their kin who had been identified in the survey—for example, as having moved back into their parents' home following a divorce. A further element in their sampling strategy was that the authors 'tried to keep an eye on the range of experiences that [they] were studying, and to identify any obvious gaps' (1990: 43). As a result of this ongoing 'stocktaking exercise', as they call it, they identified certain gaps in their data: men, because by and large they were the focus of interviews as part of kin networks rather than initial **key informants** in their own right; unemployed people, particularly because of high levels at the time of the research; ethnic minorities; social classes I, IV, and V; widows and widowers; and stepchildren and stepgrandparents. As Finch and Mason's experience shows, the process of theoretical sampling is not only one that gives priority to theoretical significance in sampling decisions, but is also one that forces researchers to sharpen their reflections on their findings during the fieldwork process.

The ideas of theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation will be encountered again when grounded theory is examined in greater detail in the context of qualitative data analysis in Chapter 24.

Generic purposive sampling

Hood (2007: 152) has usefully pointed out that there is a tendency among many writers and researchers to 'identify all things qualitative with "grounded theory"'. This is particularly the case with the notion of theoretical sampling, which is often treated as synonymous with purposive sampling when in fact it is one form of purposive sampling (see Key concept 18.3). Hood usefully contrasts grounded theory with what she calls a 'generic inductive qualitative model', which is relatively open-ended and emphasizes the generation of concepts and theories but does not entail (among other things) the iterative style of grounded theory. Sampling considerations are particularly prominent in this contrast between grounded theory and the generic inductive qualitative model. Whereas, as we have seen, theoretical sampling is a sequential sampling process whereby sampling is conducted in order to develop theoretical categories and inferences, in the generic inductive qualitative model, sampling is conducted purposively but not necessarily with regard to the generation of theory and theoretical categories. I am going to call this sampling approach *generic purposive sampling*, a category that subsumes several of the sampling strategies identified in Key concept 18.2, though not theoretical sampling. Generic purposive sampling may be employed in a sequential or in a fixed manner and the criteria for selecting cases or individuals may be formed *a priori* (for example, socio-demographic criteria) or be contingent or a mixture of both. In most of the examples discussed in this book, generic purposive sampling is fixed and *a priori*. However, the criteria employed are ones that are informed by the research questions. When using a generic purposive sampling approach with respect to the selection of cases or contexts, the researcher establishes criteria concerning the kinds of cases needed to address the research questions, identifies appropriate cases, and then samples from those cases that have been identified. When contexts are being sampled, as in the examples cited above in the work of Butler and Robson (2001), Swain (2004), and Savage et al. (2005), it is common for some form of generic purposive sampling to be employed. In the case of the study by Savage et al., each of the four sampled areas had to be predominantly middle class but had to vary in terms of social mix. These were criteria specified

at the outset that determined the sampling of areas. In Swain's (2004) ethnographic research, the three schools were selected to reveal variation in terms of two criteria: type of school (state versus fee-paying) and the social characteristics of the intake.

Generic purposive sampling (or variations of it) is often employed in relation to the selection of participants. The initial sample that provided the basis for the twenty participants in the study by Jones et al. (2010) that was referred to several times in Chapter 1 (see in particular Table 1.1) was generated by searching for senior managers who had taken early retirement in the database of several organizations. Thus, two criteria appear to have been established from the outset on an *a priori* basis—being a senior manager and an early retiree. For her study of new forms of mediated communication and their implications for interaction, Rettie (2009) focused upon mobile phone communication. She conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty-two UK adults who spent at least £15 per month on their mobile phones. For their study of the meaning of work–life balance issues for trade union representatives in two sectors (retailing and media), Rigby and O'Brien-Smith (2010) selected a purposive sample based on three criteria: making sure that representatives were at each of three levels (national officials, full-time officials, and lay representatives); union respondents were at 'better organised workplaces' (2010: 206); and there was variety in the geographical location of the representatives who were interviewed. Finally, for the research referred to in Research in focus 20.8, the authors purposively sampled employees from each of six quite different organizations. They write: 'We aimed for diversity in terms of age, organization and occupation, and approximately equal numbers of men and women. Our assumption was that this would maximize the likelihood of accessing variation and highlight any common core of experience more than a homogeneous sample would' (Bosley et al. 2009: 1499). What we see in all these examples is a quest for appropriate samples in terms of the research questions in which the researcher is interested.

Generic purposive sampling in a mixed methods context

Sometimes, when conducting a mixed methods investigation involving both quantitative and qualitative research, the findings from a survey might be used as the basis for the selection of a purposive sample. For example, in a study of social policy researchers in the UK, an e-survey was conducted that sought respondents' views on a wide variety of issues concerning criteria for

evaluating the quality of social policy research (Sempik et al. 2007; Bryman et al. 2008). Respondents were asked whether they would be prepared to be interviewed by telephone so that issues could be probed more deeply and other issues that had not been explored in the e-survey could be addressed. Of the 251 respondents who replied to the online questionnaire, 90 agreed to be interviewed. On the basis of their replies, 28 of the 90 respondents were interviewed by telephone using a semi-structured interview approach. The 28 interviewees were selected to reflect a variety of orientations to social policy research and to the evaluation of research quality. For example, one criterion was derived from where the respondent stood on the issue of whether he or she felt that social policy research should contribute to policy and practice or to knowledge or to a combination of both. This sampling strategy allowed interviewees to be selected purposively in terms of criteria that were central to the main topic of the research—the appraisal of research quality.

Another example is afforded by the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion (CCSE) project referred to in Research in focus 2.9. The researchers selected interviewees from among those who had indicated in the course of responding to the survey interview that they were prepared to be interviewed. The authors write:

The selection of households aimed to reflect the current diversity of household (or family) life in Britain. A further aim of the analysis is to explore the significance of the internal dynamics of the household for the formation of cultural tastes and the formation and transmission of cultural capital. (www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/cultural-capital-and-social-exclusion/methodology.php (accessed 27 September 2010))

In order to achieve these aims, the authors selected households for the qualitative phase of the research so that there was a distribution of households in terms of:



Student experience

Purposive sampling for a student project

Several of the students who completed questionnaires about their investigations used a form of purposive sampling when they were conducting qualitative research. Isabella Robbins provided a particularly detailed account of how she went about purposive sampling of mothers for her study of decision-making in relation to childhood vaccinations and the reasons for some of her choices. Her sampling strategy entailed a generic purposive sampling approach.

Recruitment of participants was planned to take place in my own locality, for the pragmatic reason of fitting in the collection of fieldwork with my own complex obligations. I planned to recruit mothers with contrasting socio-economic profiles, the reason being, to help make key comparisons and test and develop theoretical propositions. My plan was to recruit twenty mothers from working-class and twenty mothers from middle-class profiles in order to yield approximately forty interviews. I acknowledge that assigning the profile of class is problematic, and even more so for women whose working status is interrupted by motherhood. Their socio-economic profiles were assigned based on the mothers' current or previous job using the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) schema.

Vaccination rates are known to differ in terms of socio-demographic profiles. In line with this, I gained access to parent and toddler groups in identifiable working-class and middle-class areas of Nottingham . . . Mothers were recruited through Parent and Toddler groups in areas with socio-economic profiles. Names of the groups and their organizers were identified from a local council publication, supplemented by other publications offering information regarding services offered to parents and children in the locality.

One of the features that is striking about this account is that Isabella employed statistics about vaccination rates as a springboard for her choices of criteria of whom to interview.



To read more about Isabella's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

their profiles in terms of answers to questions on cultural capital; presence of dependent children; variety of geographical areas; and variety of types of household (Bennett et al. 2009: 276).

Snowball sampling

Snowball sampling is a sampling technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research. These participants will then suggest others and so on. As noted in Chapter 8, it is sometimes (though rarely) used in survey research when probability sampling is more or less impossible. It is also sometimes recommended when networks of individuals are the focus of

attention (Coleman 1958). In fact, Noy (2008) points out that snowball sampling is frequently presented as a strategy to be employed when probability sampling is impossible or not feasible—for example, when trying to sample hard-to-reach populations because of the absence of a sampling frame. This is often how it is represented in discussions of its use in survey research and sometimes in qualitative research too (see Research in focus 8.5). However, Noy observes from his studies of Israeli backpackers and of Israeli semi-professional male drivers that one advantage the technique offers is that it is able simultaneously to capitalize on and to reveal the connectedness of individuals in networks. Snowball sampling was employed in my study of visitors to Disney theme parks and by Schepers-Hughes in her ethnography of the illicit trade in organs (see Research in focus 18.2).



Research in focus 18.2 A snowball sample

For her study of a highly sensitive and covert area—the global trade in organs—Schepers-Hughes (2004: 31) describes her sampling approach as follows (although using the term ‘she’, Schepers-Hughes is referring to herself):

Using the traditional method of ‘snowballing’—one patient, one surgeon, one hospital, one mortuary, one eye bank leading to the next—she begins to uncover a string of clues that will eventually take her from Brazil to Argentina and Cuba, and from South Africa to Israel, the West Bank and Turkey, and from Moldova in Eastern Europe to the Philippines in Southeast Asia. Finally, the clues lead her back to transplant units in Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York City.

Through this sampling procedure, she was able to interview a wide diversity of people involved in the organs trade—transplant surgeons, nurses, procurement specialists, police officers, health ministers, and so on as well as kidney donors in several countries, kidney hunters, kidney buyers, and organ brokers. In addition, she was able to observe many of the transactions that took place.

The sampling of informants in ethnographic research is sometimes a combination of opportunistic sampling and snowball sampling. Much of the time ethnographers are forced to gather information from whatever sources are available to them. Very often they face opposition or at least indifference to their research and are relieved to glean information or views from whoever is prepared to divulge such details. This seems to have been the essence of Armstrong’s (1993: 21) strategy in the context of football hooliganism when he tried to ‘locate individuals within the group networks that constituted the Blades’. However, as the lengthy quotation from his work on page 440 suggests, he was regularly able to secure from his informants details of others whom it would be useful for him to consult. Similarly, A. Taylor (1993: 16) has

written in connection with her study of female drug-users that her research participants were

eventually obtained by a mix of ‘snowballing techniques’ . . . and my almost continuous presence in the area. . . . Rather than ask to be introduced or given names of others I could contact, when I met a woman I would spend as much time with her as she would allow, participating in her daily round, and through this come to meet others in her social circle. My continued presence in the area also led other women drug users to approach me when I was alone . . . In addition, the drug worker in the area would mention my presence and interest to women with whom he came in contact and facilitate introductions where possible.



Student experience

Snowball sampling for a student project

Jonathan Smetherham used snowball sampling for his ethnographic study of a non-governmental organization (NGO) in rural Nicaragua. He writes:

Snowball sampling was used as I was living amongst the community for 7 weeks & contacts would be made almost every day through my activities as a volunteer. By spending time talking to local residents, I would be introduced to others and made aware of further areas of the community that I would benefit from visiting.



To read more about Jonathan's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/



Sample size

One of the problems that the qualitative researcher faces is that it can be difficult to establish at the outset how many people will be interviewed if theoretical considerations guide selection. It is impossible to know, for example, how many people should be interviewed before theoretical saturation has been achieved. To a certain extent, this is not helped by the fact that the criteria for recognizing or establishing when or whether saturation has been achieved are rarely articulated in detail (Guest et al. 2006). Also, as an investigation proceeds, it may become apparent that groups will need to be interviewed who were not anticipated at the outset. Morse (2004a) gives the example of a study of sudden infant death syndrome, which was initially to focus on parents but which, as a result of interviews with them, had to be broadened to include professionals. This necessity arose because parents' accounts flagged the importance of there being uncertainty about which groups of professionals had primary responsibility in such circumstances. With probability sampling, such considerations can be specified, taking into account the size of the population and time and cost constraints.

As a rule of thumb, however, the broader the scope of a qualitative study and the more comparisons between groups in the sample that are required, the more interviews will need to be carried out (Warren 2002; Morse 2004b). Taking the second of these two criteria, if several comparisons are likely to be wanted—between males and females, different age groups, different types of research participants in terms of locally relevant factors—a larger sample is likely to be necessary. Also, in a study of the experience of relationship breakdown, fewer respondents are likely to be necessary if the emphasis is on those who have been formally married as opposed to the more

general category of being in a relationship. Nonetheless, Warren (2002: 99) makes the interesting remark that, for a qualitative interview study to be published, the minimum number of interviews required seems to be between twenty and thirty. This suggests that, although there is an emphasis on the importance of sampling purposively in qualitative research, minimum levels of acceptability operate, although there are almost certainly exceptions to Warren's rule (for example, very intensive interviews of the kind conducted in life story interviews, where there may be just one or two interviewees). Moreover, by no means all practitioners would agree with Warren's figure. Gerson and Horowitz (2002: 223) write that 'fewer than 60 interviews cannot support convincing conclusions and more than 150 produce too much material to analyse effectively and expeditiously'. The differences between these authors suggest how difficult it can be to try to specify minimum sample sizes (see also Guest et al. (2006) and Mason (2010) for other summaries of some researchers' suggestions on this issue). The size of sample that is able to support convincing conclusions is likely to vary somewhat from situation to situation in purposive sampling terms, and qualitative researchers have to recognize that they are engaged in a delicate balancing act:

In general, sample sizes in qualitative research should not be so small as to make it difficult to achieve data saturation, theoretical saturation, or informational redundancy. At the same time, the sample should not be so large that it is difficult to undertake a deep, case-oriented analysis. (Onwuegbuzie and Collins 2007: 289)

Given the ranges of opinion about appropriate sample sizes, it is not surprising that, when Mason (2010) examined the abstracts of doctoral theses derived from interview-based qualitative research in Great Britain and Ireland, he found that the 560 theses varied in sample size from 1 to 95, with a mean of 31 and a median of 28. The difference between the mean and median suggests that the mean is being inflated by some rather large samples. Mason refers to a study (an online paper whose link no longer worked when I tried to access it) that reviewed 50 grounded theory-based research articles, which found sample sizes to vary between 5 and 350.

It is also likely that the orientation of the researchers and the purposes of their research will be significant. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) make a virtue of small sample sizes by arguing that samples of fewer than twenty increase the qualitative researcher's chances of getting close involvement with their participants in interview-based studies and generating fine-grained

data, features that were significant for their study of long-term cancer survivors. What is likely to be crucial is to justify rigorously any sample size. In other words, rather than rely on others' impressions of suitable sample sizes in qualitative research, it is almost certainly better to be clear about the sampling method you employed, why you used it, and why the sample size you achieved is appropriate. It may be that the reason why you feel that a sample of a certain size is adequate is because you feel you have achieved theoretical saturation, a term that, while strongly linked to grounded theory, is often used by researchers operating within a variety of approaches. If saturation is the criterion for sample size, specifying minima or maxima for sample sizes is pointless. Essentially, the criterion for sample size is whatever it takes to achieve saturation. The problem is that, as several writers observe (e.g. Guest et al. 2006; Mason 2010), saturation is often *claimed* but not justified or explained (Bowen 2008). See Thinking deeply 18.1 for more on this issue.



Thinking deeply 18.1 Saturation and sample size

As noted in the text, it is very difficult to know in advance how many interviews you need to conduct if theoretical saturation (see Key concept 18.4) is employed as a principle for assessing the adequacy of a sample. Further, the criteria for deciding when theoretical saturation has been achieved are more or less absent. In response to these conundrums, Guest et al. (2006) conducted some experiments with data they had collected from in-depth interviews with women in two West African countries. They had conducted and transcribed sixty interviews. They analysed the process of what they call 'data saturation', which means the number of interviews 'needed to get a reliable sense of thematic exhaustion and variability within [their] data set' (Guest et al. 2006: 65). Interestingly, they found that, by and large, data saturation was achieved once around twelve transcripts had been thematically analysed. Taking the transcripts from just one of the two West African countries, by the time twelve interviews had been examined, 92 per cent of the codes used for this batch of transcripts had been generated. Also, the codes generally did not require significant revision after twelve interviews, implying that saturation of categories was arrived at quite quickly. However, as the authors note, their sample was relatively homogenous (women at high risk of contracting HIV), and the research was narrow in scope (how these women discuss sex). Consequently, it may be that saturation was achieved at an earlier point than with qualitative studies drawing on more heterogeneous samples and with broad research foci. The experiment is instructive in terms of implying that research based on qualitative interviews can be based on quite small samples, when theoretical saturation is used as a criterion for deciding on the adequacy of the sample. What is now needed are similar experiments with different samples and topics.

Related to this issue is that you need to be sure that you do not generalize inappropriately from your data. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2010) observe that for the most part there are two kinds of generalization that may be inferred from a qualitative study. One is analytic generalization, which is much the same as theoretical generalization (J. C. Mitchell 1983). These two terms

were encountered in Chapters 3 and 17. The other they call 'case-to-case transfer', which refers to making generalizations from one case to another case that is broadly similar. This is more or less the same as the notion of *moderatum* generalization (M. Williams 2000), which was referred to in Chapter 17. Generalization to a population may be legitimate when a probability sampling procedure

has been employed. Onwuegbuzie and Leech analysed all 125 empirical articles that had been published in the *Qualitative Report*, an academic journal that has been in publication since 1990. They found that 29.6 per cent of the articles contained generalizations that illegitimately went beyond the sample participants. In other words, just under one-third of articles made inferences to a

population beyond the study's participants. As the authors note, when this occurs, there is an inconsistency between the design of the research and the interpretations that are made about the resulting data. There is clearly a lesson here about the need to be clear about what you can and cannot infer from a sample of any kind, something that applies to sampling in quantitative research too.



Not just people

Sampling is not just about people but also about sampling other things. For one thing, principles of purposive sampling can be applied to things like documents, in much the same way that probability sampling can be applied to different kinds of phenomena to generate a representative sample. However, there is another dimension to sampling in qualitative research that is worth bearing in mind. This is to do with needing to sample the different contexts within which interviewing or observation take place. Writing about ethnographic research, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) mention time and context as needing to be considered in the context of sampling. Attending to *time* means that the ethnographer must make sure that people or events are observed at different times of the day and different days of the week. To do otherwise risks drawing inferences about certain people's behaviour or about events that are valid only for mornings or for weekdays rather than weekends. It is impossible to be an ethnographer all the time for several reasons: need to take time out to write up notes;

other commitments (work or domestic); and body imperatives (eating, sleeping, and so on). When the group in question operates a different cycle from the ethnographer's normal regime (such as night shifts in a hospital or going to nightclubs), the requirement to time sample may necessitate a considerable change of habit.

It can also be important to sample in terms of *context*. People's behaviour is influenced by contextual factors, so that it is important to ensure that such behaviour is observed in a variety of locations. For example, one of the important features of research on football hooliganism is that, of course, those engaged in such activity are not full-time football hooligans. In order to understand the culture and worldview of football hooligans, writers like Armstrong (1993) and Giulianotti (1995; Research in focus 19.2) had to ensure that they interacted with them not just around the time of football matches, but also in a variety of contexts (pubs, general socializing), which also meant at different times.



Using more than one sampling approach

Purposive sampling often involves more than one of the approaches outlined above. For example, it is quite common for snowball sampling to be preceded by another form of purposive sampling. In effect, the process entails sampling initial participants without using a snowball approach and then using these initial contacts to broaden out through a snowballing method. Thus, in their study of the role of power in the branding of a tourist destination—the Gold Coast in Australia—Marzano and Scott (2009) initially purposively sampled key stakeholders in the branding process. These were individuals who had

key roles in the agencies responsible for and with an interest in the branding of this tourist destination. As a result of the snowballing process, people like senior managers in hotels and theme parks were also identified and became candidates for inclusion in the research, which was conducted by semi-structured interview. To give a further and in some ways similar example, Vasquez and Wetzel (2009) report the results of a study of racial identities among two US ethnic groups. When collecting data on one of these groups—Potawatomi Indians—the researchers collected data from an initial group

of interviewees who had been selected by virtue of their formal positions in the life of Potawatomi Nation. These are described as 'elected officials, directors of key programmes, and community members' (Vasquez and Wetzel 2009: 1560). Thereafter, snowball sampling took over to broaden out the scope of the research, with 113 individuals being interviewed. In both of these studies, individuals were initially selected because they occupied a position relevant to the investigation, and this primary sample was then used to suggest further relevant participants to expand the research. In both cases, a generic purposive sample (based on individuals who met a criterion—occupancy of structural positions relevant to the research) was selected, and then a snowballing approach was employed.

A further sense in which more than one sampling approach may be employed is when researchers appear to aim for an element of both purposiveness and representativeness in their approach. As an example, Savage et al. (2005) used an electoral register to sample one in three of certain streets and then arranged interviews with individuals in households. Their search was for interviewees who would exemplify the social make-up of each of the four Manchester areas. Similarly, Butler and Robson (2001) aimed to interview seventy-five 'gentrifiers' in each of the three London areas and used the electoral register to locate individuals who could be identified as appropriate to their research. They write: 'we believe that our respondents are largely representative of the middle-class populations in each of our areas' (Butler and Robson 2001: 2148). For her study of hair salons and barbers referred to in Research in focus 2.3, R. S. Cohen (2010) constructed an initial sample by listing all salons in the city by postcode and interviewing at least one person in each establishment. There was then a second stage,

which was more suggestive of purposive sampling, where data derived from the survey were employed to select interviewees from four categories of salon that were relevant to the research questions and that had not been sufficiently covered in the first sampling stage: 'salons containing chair-renting, chain-salons, barbershops, and salons with primarily ethnic minority clients' (R. S. Cohen 2010: 204).

There is evidence of a quest for both purposiveness and representativeness in these three studies. With the work of both Savage et al. and Butler and Robson, the purposiveness reveals itself mainly in the search for areas with appropriate characteristics; in the case of Cohen's research, the purposiveness reveals itself in the boosting of the sample with additional interviewees likely to be relevant to the research questions. At the same time, there is a strong sense of wanting to generate a sample with at least a semblance of representativeness. This is quite an interesting development, since sampling in qualitative research, as we have seen, is primarily associated with purposive sampling. At the same time, it raises an interesting question that may at least in part lie behind the use of representativeness in these studies. Given that, when you sample purposively, in many cases several individuals (or whatever the unit of analysis is) will be eligible for inclusion, how do you decide which one or ones to include? In other words, if my research questions direct me to select a subsample that has criteria *a* and *b* and another subsample that has criteria *a* and *c*, so that I can compare them, how do I choose between the individuals who meet each of the two pairs of criteria? Sampling for at least a modicum of representativeness, as these researchers appear to have done, may be one way of making such a decision.



Key points

- Purposive sampling is the fundamental principle for selecting cases and individuals in qualitative research.
- Purposive sampling places the investigation's research questions at the forefront of sampling considerations.
- It is important to bear in mind that purposive sampling will entail considerations of the levels at which sampling needs to take place.
- It is important to distinguish between theoretical sampling and the generic purposive sampling approach, as they are sometimes treated synonymously.
- Theoretical saturation is a useful principle for making decisions about sample size, but there is evidence that it is often claimed rather than demonstrated.



Questions for review

- How does purposive sampling differ from probability sampling and why do many qualitative researchers prefer to use the former?

Levels of sampling

- Why might it be significant to distinguish between the different levels at which sampling can take place in a qualitative research project?

Purposive sampling

- Why is theoretical sampling such an important facet of grounded theory?
- How does theoretical sampling differ from the generic purposive sampling approach?
- Why is theoretical saturation such an important ingredient of theoretical sampling?
- What are the main reasons for considering the use of snowball sampling?

Sample size

- Why do writers seem to disagree so much on what is a minimum acceptable sample size in qualitative research?
- To what extent does theoretical sampling assist the qualitative researcher in making decisions about sample size?

Not just people

- Why might it be important to remember in purposive sampling that it is not just people who are candidates for consideration in sampling issues?

Using more than one sampling approach

- How might it be useful to select people purposively following a survey?
-



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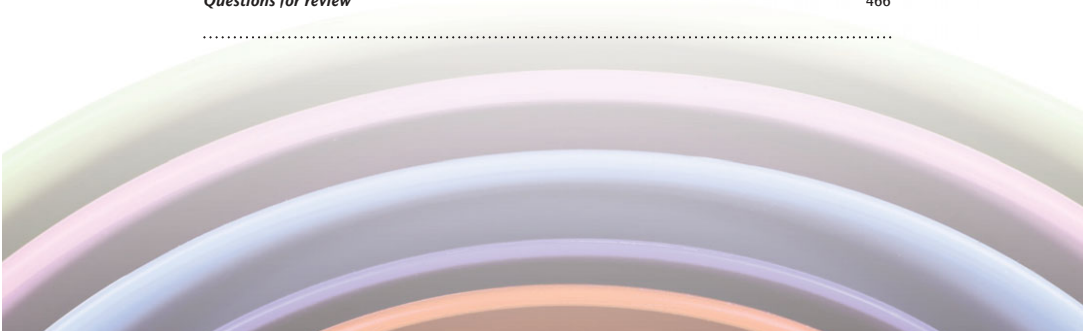
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19

Ethnography and participant observation

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Chapter guide

Ethnography and participant observation entail the extended involvement of the researcher in the social life of those he or she studies. However, the former term is also frequently taken to refer to the written output of that research. The chapter explores:

- the problems of gaining access to different settings and some suggestions about how they might be overcome;
- the issue of whether a covert role is practicable and acceptable;
- the role of key informants for the ethnographer;
- the different kinds of roles that ethnographers can assume in the course of their fieldwork;
- the role of field notes in ethnography and the varieties of forms they can assume;
- issues involved in bringing ethnographic research to an end;
- the role of visual materials, which have attracted increased attention in recent years, in ethnography;
- the controversy about the nature of feminist ethnography;
- key issues raised by discussions about the writing of ethnography;
- the changing meanings of 'ethnography'.

Introduction

Discussions about the merits and limitations of participant observation have been a fairly standard ingredient in textbooks on social research for many years. However, for some time writers on research methods have preferred to write about **ethnography** rather than **participant observation**. It is difficult to date the point at which this change of terminology (though it is more than just this) occurred, but sometime in the 1970s ethnography began to become the preferred term. Before that, ethnography was primarily associated with social anthropological research, whereby the investigator visits a (usually) foreign land, gains access to a group (for example, a tribe or village), spends a considerable amount of time (often many years) with that group with the aim of uncovering its culture, watches and listens to what people say and do, engages people in conversations to probe specific issues of interest, takes copious **field notes**, and returns home to write up the fruits of his or her labours.

Key concept 19.1 represents an attempt to deal with some of these issues and to arrive at a working definition of ethnography. The seven bullet points at the end of Key concept 19.1 that make up the definition of ethnography featured there could be viewed as a simple process of joining a group, watching what goes on, making some

notes, and writing it all up. In fact, ethnography is nowhere nearly as straightforward as this implies. This chapter will outline some of the main decision areas that confront ethnographers, along with some of the many contingencies they face. However, it is not easy to generalize about the ethnographic research process in such a way as to provide definitive recommendations about research practice. As prefigured at the end of the previous chapter, the diversity of experiences that confront ethnographers and the variety of ways in which they deal with them does not readily permit clear-cut generalizations. The following comment in a book on ethnography makes this point well:

Every field situation is different and initial luck in meeting good informants, being in the right place at the right time and striking the right note in relationships may be just as important as skill in technique. Indeed, many successful episodes in the field do come about through good luck as much as through sophisticated planning, and many unsuccessful episodes are due as much to bad luck as to bad judgement. (Sarsby 1984: 96)



Key concept 19.1

What are ethnography and participant observation?

Many definitions of ethnography and participant observation are very difficult to distinguish. Both draw attention to the fact that the participant observer/ethnographer immerses him- or herself in a group for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the fieldworker, and asking questions. It is possible that the term 'ethnography' is sometimes preferred because 'participant observation' seems to imply just observation, though in practice participant observers do more than simply observe. Typically, participant observers and ethnographers will gather further data through interviews and the collection of documents. It may be, therefore, that the apparent emphasis on observation in the term 'participant observation' has meant that an apparently more inclusive term would be preferable, even though in fact it is generally recognized that the method entails a wide range of methods of data collection and sources. Ethnography is also sometimes taken to refer to a study in which participant observation is the prevalent research method but that also has a specific focus on the culture of the group in which the ethnographer is immersed.

However, the term 'ethnography' has an additional meaning, in that it frequently simultaneously refers to both a method of research of the kind outlined above *and* the written product of that research. Indeed, 'ethnography' frequently denotes both a research process and the written outcome of the research. For example, consider the opening sentences of A. Taylor's (1993) book on female drug-users, which was mentioned on several occasions in Chapter 17.

This book provides an account of the lives and experiences of a group of female intravenous drug users in Glasgow. It is based on fifteen months' participant observation of the women in their own setting and on in-depth interviews carried out at the end of the observation period. It is the first full ethnographic account of the lifestyle of female drug users. (A. Taylor 1993: 1)

It is worth noting the following features.

- The book is subtitled *An Ethnography of a Female Injecting Community*. The term 'ethnography' therefore seems to apply both to the method of investigation and to the book itself. This is underlined by the phrase 'the first full ethnographic account'.
- The mention of the main data-collection methods as participant observation *and* interviewing suggests that the ethnographic research comprises these two techniques of data collection but that interviewing is viewed as something separate from participant observation. In fact, participant observers frequently conduct interviews in the course of their research.
- The passage draws on several qualitative research motifs encountered in Chapter 17, such as the preference for seeing through the eyes of the people being studied (reference to 'lives and experiences') and a naturalistic stance ('in their own setting').

In this book, ethnography will be taken to mean a research method in which the researcher:

- is immersed in a social setting for an extended period of time;
- makes regular observations of the behaviour of members of that setting;
- listens to and engages in conversations;
- interviews informants on issues that are not directly amenable to observation or that the ethnographer is unclear about (or indeed for other possible reasons);
- collects documents about the group;
- develops an understanding of the culture of the group and people's behaviour within the context of that culture;
- and writes up a detailed account of that setting.

Thus, ethnography is being taken to include participant observation and is also taken to encapsulate the notion of ethnography as a written product of ethnographic research.



Tips and skills

Micro-ethnography

If you are doing research for an undergraduate project or master's dissertation, it is unlikely that you will be able to conduct a full-scale ethnography. Ethnographic research usually entails long periods of time in the field in an organization, as part of a community, or in the company of a group. Nevertheless, it may be possible to carry out a form of *micro-ethnography* (Wolcott 1990b). This would involve focusing on a particular aspect of a topic. For example, if you are interested in call centres, you might focus on the way staff manage to interact and discuss work problems in spite of continuously receiving calls and being monitored. A relatively short period of time (from a couple of weeks to a few months) could be spent in the organization—on either a full-time or a part-time basis—to achieve such a tightly defined topic.

However, this statement should not be taken to imply that forethought and an awareness of alternative ways of doing things are irrelevant. It is with this kind of issue

that the rest of this chapter will be concerned. However, issues to do with the conduct of interviews by ethnographers will be reserved for Chapter 20.



Access

One of the key and yet most difficult steps in ethnography is gaining access to a social setting that is relevant to the research problem in which you are interested. The way in which access is approached differs along several dimensions, one of which is whether the setting is a relatively open one or a relatively closed one (Bell 1969). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) make a similar distinction when they refer to 'public' settings as opposed to ones that are not public (see also Lofland and Lofland 1995). Closed, non-public settings are likely to be organizations of various kinds, such as firms, schools, cults, social movements, and so on. The open/public setting is likely to be everything else—that is, research involving communities, gangs, drug-users, and so on.

Overt versus covert ethnography

One way to ease the access problem is to assume a *covert* role—in other words, not to disclose the fact that you are a researcher. This strategy obviates the need to negotiate access to organizations or to explain why you want to intrude into people's lives and make them objects of study. As we shall see, seeking access is a highly fraught business, and the adoption of a covert role removes some of the difficulties. These two distinctions—the open/public versus closed setting and the overt versus covert role—

suggest, following Bell (1969), a fourfold distinction in forms of ethnography (see Figure 19.1, which contains for each of the four types examples that have been encountered in earlier chapters or will be mentioned in this one).

Three points should be registered about Figure 19.1. First, the open/public setting versus closed setting distinction is not a hard-and-fast one. Sometimes, gaining access to groups can have a near formal quality, such as having to pacify a gang leader's anxieties about your goals. Also, organizations sometimes create contexts that have a public character, such as the meetings that are arranged for members or prospective recruits by social movements such as religious cults or political movements like the National Front.

Secondly, the overt versus covert distinction is not without problems. For example, while an ethnographer may seek access through an overt route, there may be many people with whom he or she comes into contact who will not be aware of the ethnographer's status as a researcher. P. Atkinson (1981: 135) notes in connection with his research on the training of doctors in a medical school that, although he was 'an "open" observer with regard to the doctors and students', he was 'a "disguised" observer with regard to the patients'. Also, some ethnographers move between the two roles (see Research in focus 19.1).

Figure 19.1

Four forms of ethnography

	Open/public setting	Closed setting
Overt role	<i>Type 1</i> • Taylor's (1993) study of intravenous drug-users • Foster's (1995) study of a high-crime community • Giulianotti's (1995) research on football hooligans (Research in focus 19.2) • Hobbs's (1988, 1993) research on entrepreneurship in London's East End • Whyte's (1955) classic study of street corner life in a Boston slum area • O'Reilly's (2000) research on the British living on Spain's Costa del Sol • Hodkinson's (2002) study of goths	<i>Type 2</i> • Leidner's (1993) studies of a McDonald's restaurant and an insurance firm • Atkinson's (1981) research on medical school training (see Research in focus 19.4) • Burgess's (1983, 1987) research on a Roman Catholic comprehensive school • Simakova's (2010) study of the marketing of new technology • Waddington's (1994) study of a prolonged strike (Research in focus 17.4)
Covert role	<i>Type 3</i> • Patrick's (1973) study of a violent Glasgow gang • Pearson's (2009) study of football hooligans	<i>Type 4</i> • Holdaway's (1982, 1983) study of a police force in which he was already a policeman • Research by Hobbs et al. (2003) on bouncers (see also Winlow et al. 2001) • Research by Mattley (2006) on working for a sex fantasy phone line

Note: This figure is a development of a table in Bell (1969).



Research in focus 19.1

An example of the perils of covert observation: the case of field notes in the lavatory

Ditton's (1977) research on 'fiddling' in a bakery provides an interesting case of the practical difficulties of taking notes during covert observation as well as an illustration of an ethnographer who shifted his position from covert to overt observation at least in part because of those difficulties:

Nevertheless, I was able to develop personal covert participant-observation skills. Right from the start, I found it impossible to keep everything that I wanted to remember in my head until the end of the working day . . . and so had to take rough notes as I was going along. But I was stuck 'on the line', and had nowhere to retire to privately to jot things down. Eventually, the wheeze of using innocently provided lavatory cubicles occurred to me. Looking back, all my notes for that third summer were on Bronco toilet paper! Apart from the awkward tendency for pencilled notes to be self-erasing from hard toilet paper . . . my frequent requests for 'time out' after interesting happenings or conversations in the bakehouse and the amount of time I was spending in the lavatory began to get noticed. I had to pacify some genuinely concerned workmates, give up totally undercover operations, and 'come out' as an observer—albeit in a limited way. I eventually began to scribble notes more openly, but still not in front of people when they were talking. When questioned about this, as I was occasionally, I coyly said that I was writing things down that occurred to me about 'my studies'. (Ditton 1977: 5)

In terms of the distinctions in Figure 19.1, Ditton moved from a Type 4 to a Type 2 form of ethnography.

Another interesting case is provided by Glucksman (1994), who in the 1970s left her academic post to work on a factory assembly line in order to shed light on the reasons why feminism appeared not to be relevant to working-class women. In a sense, she was a covert observer, but her motives for the research were primarily political, and she says that, at the time she was undertaking the research, she had no intention of writing the book that subsequently appeared and that was published under a pseudonym (Cavendish 1982). After the book's publication, it was treated as an example of ethnographic research. Was she an overt or a covert observer (or neither or both)? Whichever description applies, this is an interesting case of what might be termed *retrospective ethnography*.

A third point to note about Figure 19.1 is that entries are more numerous in the Types 1 and 2 cells than in the Types 3 and 4 cells. In large part, this reflects the fact that ethnographers are far more likely to be in an overt role than a covert one. There are several reasons for this situation. As Key concept 19.2 reveals, the reasons for the preference of most ethnographers for an overt role are to do with practical and ethical considerations, but the latter predominate in most researchers' thinking. Because of the ethical problems that beset covert research (and indeed some of the practical difficulties), the bulk of the discussion of access issues that follows will focus upon ethnographers seeking to employ an overt role.

Access to closed settings

As Van Maanen and Kolb (1985: 11) observe, 'gaining access to most organizations is not a matter to be taken lightly but one that involves some combination of strategic planning, hard work and dumb luck'. In selecting a particular social setting to act as a case study in which to conduct an ethnographic investigation, the researcher may employ several criteria. These criteria should be determined by the general research area in which he or she is interested. Very often a number of potential cases (and sometimes very many) will be relevant to your research problem. You may choose a certain case because of its 'fit' with your research questions, but there are no guarantees of success, as Van Maanen and Kolb's remark suggests. Sometimes, sheer perseverance pays off. Leidner (1993) was determined that one of the organizations in which she conducted ethnographic research on the routinization of service work should be McDonald's. She writes:

I knew from the beginning that I wanted one of the case studies to be of McDonald's. The company was a pioneer and exemplar of routinized interaction, and since it was locally based, it seemed like the perfect place to start. McDonald's had other ideas, however, and only after tenacious pestering and persuasion did I overcome corporate employees' polite demurrals, couched in terms of protecting proprietary information and the company's image. (Leidner 1993: 234–5)

This kind of determination is necessary for any instance in which you want to study a specific organization, such as a particular religious sect or social movement. Rejection is likely to require a complete rethink.

However, with many research questions, several potential cases are likely to meet your criteria. Organizational researchers have developed a range of tactics, many of which may seem rather unsystematic in tone, but they are worth drawing attention to.

- Use friends, contacts, colleagues, academics to help you gain access; provided the organization is relevant to your research question, the route should not matter.
- Try to get the support of someone within the organization who will act as your champion. This person may be prepared to vouch for you and the value of your research. Such people are placed in the role of 'sponsors'.
- Usually you will need to get access through top management/senior executives. Even though you may secure a certain level of agreement lower down the hierarchy, you will usually need clearance from them. Such senior people act as 'gatekeepers'.
- Offer something in return (for example, a report). This strategy carries risks in that it may turn you into a cheap consultant and may invite restrictions on your activities, such as insistence on seeing what you write. However, it helps to create a sense of being *trustworthy*. Some writers on research methodology do not recommend this approach, although, among researchers on formal organizations, it is commonplace.
- Provide a clear explanation of your aims and methods and be prepared to deal with concerns. Suggest a meeting at which you can deal with worries and provide an explanation of what you intend to do in terms that can readily be understood by others.
- Be prepared to negotiate—you will want complete access, but it is unlikely you will be given a *carte blanche*.



Key concept 19.2

What is the covert role in ethnography?

Advantages

- *There is no problem of access.* Adopting a covert role largely gets around the access problem, because the researcher does not have to seek permission to gain entry to a social setting or organization.
- *Reactivity is not a problem.* Using a covert role also reduces reactivity (see Key concept 12.4), because participants do not know the person conducting the study is a researcher. Therefore, they are less likely to adjust their behaviour because of the researcher's presence.

Disadvantages

- *The problem of taking notes.* As Ditton (1977; see Research in focus 19.1) discovered, it is difficult and probably in some circumstances impossible to take notes when people do not realize you are conducting research. As we will see below, notes are very important to an ethnographer, and it is too risky to rely exclusively on your memory.
- *The problem of not being able to use other methods.* Ethnography entails the use of several methods, but, if the researcher is in a covert role, it is difficult to steer conversations in a certain direction for fear of detection and it is essentially impossible to engage in interviewing.
- *Anxiety.* The covert ethnographer is under constant threat of having his or her cover blown. Ethnography is frequently a stressful research method, and the worries about detection can add to those anxieties. Moreover, if the ethnographer is found out, the whole research project may be jeopardized.
- *Ethical problems.* Covert observation transgresses two important ethical tenets: it does not provide participants with the opportunity for informed consent (whereby they can agree or disagree to participate on the basis of information supplied to them) and it entails deception. It can also be taken to be a violation of the principle of privacy. Also, many writers take the view that, in addition to being potentially damaging to research participants, it can also harm the practice of research, because of fears about social researchers being identified by the public as snoopers or voyeurs if they are found out. Ethical issues are considered in greater detail in Chapter 6.

However

- As the main text points out, in some circumstances the overt/covert distinction may be a matter of degree.
- Also, a covert participant observer may reveal *some* aspects of his or her true identity. While Mattley (2006: 144) describes herself as a covert participant observer when she worked for and conducted ethnographic research on a sex fantasy phone line, she writes: 'I decided that I would be open about who I am, but not why I wanted to be hired.' Part of the way through the research, her supervisor suggested she should do a study of the callers. She asked the owner of the business about whether she could do this and he agreed, declining her offer to let him read anything she wanted to write about the work prior to publication. As he graphically put it: 'I hate to read that fucking stuff, I trust you, you won't fuck me over' (Mattley 2006: 146). However, with respect to her callers, Mattley was still a covert participant observer.

- Be reasonably honest about the amount of people's time you are likely to take up. This is a question you will almost certainly be asked if you are seeking access to commercial organizations and probably to many not-for-profit ones too.

Access to open/public settings

Gaining access to public settings is beset with problems, many of which are similar in nature to access to closed settings. An example of the difficulties that await the

researcher is one of Whyte's (1955) early encounters in the field in his classic case study *Street Corner Society*, when he was trying to make contacts during his early days in the field in Boston's North End. The following incident occurred in a hotel bar:

I looked around me again and now noticed a threesome: one man and two women. It occurred to me that here was a maldistribution of females which I might be able to rectify. I approached the group and opened with something like this: 'Pardon me. Would you mind if I join you?' There was a moment of silence while the man stared at me. He then offered to throw me downstairs. I assured him that this would not be necessary and demonstrated as much by walking right out of there without any assistance. (Whyte 1955: 289)

Sometimes, ethnographers will be able to have their paths smoothed by individuals who act as both sponsor and gatekeeper. In Whyte's case, the role played by 'Doc'

has become the stuff of legend, and there is a temptation to seek out your Doc when attempting to gain access to a group. Indeed, when Gans (1962) decided to conduct ethnographic research in an area that was adjacent to the part of Boston on which Whyte had carried out his research, he visited Whyte 'to find out how [he] could meet a "Doc"' (Gans 1968: 311).

In seeking to gain access to one group of football hooligans, Giulianotti (1995; see Research in focus 19.2) actively sought out someone who could adopt this role for him, but, in gaining access to a second group, he was able to draw upon existing acquaintances who could ease his entrée into the group. We see here two common methods of gaining access to groups—via gatekeepers and via acquaintances who then act as sponsors. In seeking access to intravenous female drug-users, A. Taylor (1993) consciously used a gatekeeper strategy. She contacted a local detached drug worker in the area, who introduced her to some local users and accompanied her on her first few research visits. A form of research bargain (see Research in focus 19.2) was set up in that Taylor agreed that the drug worker could refer clients to



Research in focus 19.2

Access to football hooligans

Giulianotti (1995) sought access to two groups of football supporters engaged in hooligan activity: Aberdeen and Hibernian 'casuals', as the particular groups he was interested in termed themselves. Access to the Aberdeen casuals was reasonably smooth, in that he was a close friend of three of the forty-seven Aberdeen casuals who had been caught by the police at a notorious match in 1985. He had also gone to school and socialized with many of the first group of casuals to emerge in Aberdeen in the 1982–5 period. He also claims that in terms of 'age, attire, and argot' his personal characteristics were similar to those of the people he was studying. Gradually his contacts with Aberdeen casuals broadened out and eventually he 'began socializing freely with the gang at football matches, travelling to and from matches within the main grouping of the Aberdeen casuals' (Giulianotti 1995: 4). Access to the equivalent Hibernian (Hibs) supporters in Edinburgh was much more difficult for three reasons: absence of prior acquaintanceships; his Aberdonian background and accent; and a high level of negative newspaper publicity about the Hibs casuals at the time he was seeking access, which made the group sensitive to infiltration and people writing about them. Eventually, he was able to negotiate access to the group by striking what he, following Becker (1970), calls a 'research bargain': he provided the Hibs supporters with answers to questions about the Aberdeen 'casual scene', such as 'What do Aberdeen say about us?' (Giulianotti 1995: 6). This allowed him to establish among the Hibs supporters his reasons for studying the Aberdeen casuals as well. Giulianotti also actively sought out a gatekeeper who could ease his entry into the group. After some abortive attempts, he was finally introduced to someone at a game, and this contact allowed his access to further supporters to spread. Giulianotti (1995: 3) describes his overall research approach thus:

The research . . . consists of regularly introducing myself to new research acquaintances; renegotiating association with familiar casuals; talking with them, drinking with them, and going to matches with them; generally participating with them in a variety of social situations; but disengaging myself from preparing for and participating in violence, within and outside of football match contexts.

her if any of his clients said they would prefer to discuss issues with a female. Similarly, Hobbs (1988) says that he used his skills as a football coach to gain access to various entrepreneurial networks for his study of London's East End.

'Hanging around' is another common access strategy. As a strategy, it typically entails either loitering in an area until you are noticed or gradually becoming incorporated into or asking to join a group. The second of these was roughly the approach Whyte was taking, which nearly led to an encounter with a staircase. Wolf (1991) employed a hanging-around strategy in gaining access to outlaw bikers in Canada. On one occasion he met a group

of them at a motorcycle shop and expressed an interest in 'hanging around' with them but tried to move too quickly in seeking information about and access to them and was forced to abandon his plans. Eventually, a hanging-around strategy resulted in him being approached by the leader of a biker group (Rebels MC), who acted as his sponsor. In order to bring this off, Wolf ensured that he was properly attired. Attention to dress and demeanour can be a very important consideration when seeking access to either public or closed settings.

As these anecdotes suggest, gaining access to social settings is a crucial first step in ethnographic research, in that, without access, your research plans will be halted in



Student experience

The need for persistence

Getting access to organizations can be very difficult. This is likely to be the case for researchers wanting to conduct qualitative research based on interviews, as well as for participant observers. Gareth Matthews's account of trying to gain access to employers and managers of hospitality organizations suggests that this can be difficult and that it is necessary to allow a considerable amount of time.

I needed to gain access to employers and managers of 40 hospitality establishments while I was living in Brighton. Therefore, I wrote a letter to around 200 employers, which included a description of my research aims and a rough idea as to the content of the interview questions. The letter ended by saying something along the lines of 'I will telephone early next week to try to arrange an appropriate time for the interview'. The following Monday, I telephoned all these businesses, asking to speak to the manager or employer and, referring to the letter, I requested an interview.

This strategy was not really a success. First, as I did not know the names of the individual managers and employers, not many of the people I spoke to had opened or read the letter, as it was addressed to the 'manager'. Second, while some of those in small businesses had read the letter, and were relatively easy to get hold of on the phone, it was extremely difficult to speak to the managers of large hotels—partly because there are, of course, numerous 'managers' in these organizations.

In the end, it proved useful to draw up a spreadsheet with all the relevant data on each business—under 'name of business', 'address', 'telephone number', etc.—and to record the responses at particular times when I telephoned. This was a good way, first, to narrow down the list by deleting those who refused to be interviewed and, second, to keep track of when I had been told the manager/employer would be likely to be around to speak to.

I had some success with this approach, but I also found that it worked well simply to walk around Brighton asking managers and employers for interviews 'on the spot'. It seemed that, when not given the easy choice of arranging or postponing the interview (which they often subsequently forgot anyway), managers/employers were more likely to agree there and then, or to ask me to come back later on the same day.

It is also worth noting that both these strategies were far more successful in the winter than in the summer, which is unsurprising considering how busy hospitality businesses are during the holiday months.

Gareth's last point suggests that it is important to be sensitive to the nature of the organizations to which you are seeking to gain access.



To read more about Gareth's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

their tracks. It is also fraught with difficulties and in certain cases with danger—for example, when the research is likely to be on groups engaged in violent or criminal activities. Therefore, this discussion of access strategies can be only a starting point in knowing what kinds of approach can be considered.

Ongoing access

But access does not finish when you have made contact and gained an entrée to the group. You still need access to *people*. Simply because you have gained access to an organization does not mean that you will have an easy passage through the organization. Securing access is in many ways an ongoing activity. It is likely to prove a problem in closed contexts like organizations.

- People will have suspicions about you, perhaps seeing you as an instrument of top management (it is very common for members of organizations to believe that researchers are placed there to check up on them). When Sharpe (2000: 366) began research on prostitution in a red light area, she was quickly depicted as being 'anything from a social worker to a newspaper reporter with hidden cameras and microphones'. When conducting her research on the British on the Costa del Sol, O'Reilly (2000) was suspected of being from the Department of Social Security and of being a tax inspector.
- People will worry that what they say or do may get back to bosses or to colleagues in work organizations and to peers in other kinds of environment. Van Maanen (1991a) notes from his research on the police that, if you conduct ethnographic research among officers, you are likely to observe activities that may be deeply discrediting and even illegal. Your credibility among police officers will be determined by your reactions to situations and events that are known to be difficult for individuals.
- If people have these worries, they may go along with your research but in fact sabotage it, engaging in deceptions, misinformation, and not allowing access to 'back regions' (Goffman 1956).

There are three things you can do to smooth the path of ongoing access.

- Play up your credentials. Use your past work and experience; your knowledge of the organization and/or its sector; your understanding of their problems.
- Pass tests. Be non-judgemental when things are said to you about informal activities or about the

organization; make sure information given to you does not get back to others, whether bosses or peers.

- You may need a role. If your research involves quite a lot of participant observation, the role will be part of your position in the organization; otherwise, you will need to construct a 'front', by your dress, by your explanations about what you are doing there, by helping out occasionally with work or offering advice. Be consistent—do not behave ambiguously or inconsistently.

Similar considerations apply to research in public settings.

- Make sure you have thought about ways in which people's suspicions can be allayed. You will need a 'front', as Ditton (1977; Research in focus 19.1) had when referring to 'his studies'. Similarly, Giulianotti (1995; see Research in focus 19.2) simply said that he was doing research on football supporters for a book.
- Be prepared for tests of either competence or credibility. A. Taylor (1993) reports that, at a drop-in centre at which she had been allowed to attend a meeting, 'proper cups' for tea were put out. Afterwards Taylor (1993: 15) was told that, if she had crooked her 'wee finger', as the leader of the centre had done, her informant 'would have put [Taylor] down in such a way that you'd never want to speak to us again'. When researching gang members in a poor community, Horowitz (Gerson and Horowitz 2002; see Research in focus 19.5) writes that she was frequently told 'confidential' stories (which turned out to be fictional) to determine whether she could keep a secret.
- Be prepared for changes in circumstances. Both Giulianotti (1995; Research in focus 19.2) and Armstrong (1993) found that sudden newspaper exposés of football hooliganism or evidence of police infiltration can engender worries that you are not what or who you say you are.

Key informants

One aspect of having sponsors or gatekeepers who smooth access for the ethnographer is that they may become **key informants** in the course of the subsequent fieldwork. The ethnographer relies a lot on informants, but certain informants may become particularly important to the research. They often develop an appreciation of the research and direct the ethnographer to situations, events, or people likely to be helpful to the progress of the investigation. Whyte's (1955) study is again an extreme example of this development. Whyte reports

Doc as saying to him at one point: 'You tell me what you want to see, and we'll arrange it. When you want some information, I'll ask for it, and you listen. When you want to find out their philosophy of life, I'll start an argument and get it for you. If there's something else you want to get, I'll stage an act for you' (Whyte 1955: 292). Doc was also helpful in warning Whyte that he was asking too many questions, when he told him to 'go easy on that "who", "what", "why", "when", "where", stuff' (Whyte 1955: 303). Patrick (1973) was able to develop a similarly fruitful relationship with 'Tim' for his study of a violent gang in Glasgow. A. Taylor (1993) says that her period of participant observation was in relation to fifty female drug-users and that intensive interviews were carried out with twenty-six women, but that eight of the women were key informants.

Key informants can clearly be of great help to the ethnographer and frequently provide a support that helps with the stress of fieldwork. However, it also needs to be borne in mind that they carry risks in that the ethnographer may develop an undue reliance on the key informant, and, rather than seeing social reality through the eyes of members of the social setting, the researcher is seeing social reality through the eyes of the key informant.

In addition, the ethnographer will encounter many people who will act as informants. Their accounts may be solicited or unsolicited (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Some researchers prefer the latter, because of its greater spontaneity and naturalism. Very often, research participants develop a sense of the kinds of events the ethnographer wants to see or encounters that it would be beneficial to be present at. Armstrong (1993) says that, while doing research on 'The Blades', a group of supporters of Sheffield United Football Club who were engaged in

hooligan activity (see Chapter 17 for other references to this research), he would sometimes get tip-offs:

'We're all gonna' Leeds in a couple o' weeks . . . four coaches, Pond Street, town centre. If you're serious about this study you'll be down there on one of 'em.' I often travelled on the same coach as Ray [an informant]; he would then sit with me at matches and in pubs and point out Blades, giving me background information. Sometimes he would start conversations with Blades about incidents which he knew I wanted to know about and afterwards would ask 'Did you get all that down then?' . . . There was never one particular informant; rather, there were many Blades I could ring up and meet at any time, who were part of the core and would always welcome a beer and a chat about 'It', or tell me who I 'ought to 'ave a word wi'. (Armstrong 1993: 24–5)

Such unsolicited sources of information are highly attractive to the ethnographer because of their relative spontaneity, although, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 130–1) observe, they may on occasions be staged for the ethnographer's benefit. Solicited accounts can occur in two ways: by interview (see Chapter 20) or by casual questioning during conversations (though in ethnographic research the boundary between an interview and a conversation is by no means clear-cut, as Burgess (1984) makes clear). When the ethnographer needs specific information concerning an issue that is not amenable to direct observation or that is not cropping up during 'natural' conversations, solicited accounts are likely to be the only way forward.



Roles for ethnographers

Related to the issue of ongoing access (or relationships in the field, as it is sometimes called) is the question of the kind of role the ethnographer adopts in relation to the social setting and its members. Several schemes have been devised by writers on research methods to describe the various roles that can be and have been adopted by ethnographers (Gold 1958; Gans 1968; Adler and Adler 1987). These classifications usually focus on the degree of involvement of the ethnographer in the social world he or she is researching.

Figure 19.2 attempts to bring together some of the underlying features of these classifications of ethnographers' roles. It distinguishes six roles which are best thought of as ideal-typical forms (Weber). It is reasonably exhaustive and most ethnographic roles can be subsumed more or less under each type. The six roles are arrayed in terms of levels of participation in the life and core activities of the group or social context being investigated. There is a tendency, which is apparent from the descriptions of the roles, for those that entail higher

Figure 19.2

Field roles and participation in ethnographic research

Participation and Involvement	Type and description of role	Example studies
	Covert Full Member. Full membership of group but the researcher's status as a researcher is unknown. In closed settings like organizations, the researcher works as a paid employee for the group. The employment may be extant or something that takes place after a decision to do the research has been arrived at. In the case of open settings like communities, the researcher moves to the area for a significant length of time or employs a pre-existing identity or location as a means of becoming a full member for the purposes of research.	Pearson's covert participant observation of football hooligans: 'Whilst it was possible to avoid committing some individual offences, a refusal to commit crimes on a regular basis would have aroused suspicions and reduced research opportunities. As a result, I committed "minor" offences (which I tentatively defined as those which would not cause direct physical harm to a research subject) on a weekly basis as part of the research routine. My strategy was to commit only the offences which the majority of the research subjects were committing and that I considered necessary to carry out the research. Furthermore, whilst I would commit lesser offences with regularity I would, if possible, avoid more serious ones' (Pearson 2009: 246–7). Research by Winlow et al. on bouncers: 'As our researcher became more conversant with the environment, acting like a bouncer became almost second nature and the covert role relatively easy to sustain. He was after all not just pretending to be one of them, he actually was. He was being paid to be a bouncer, and with the job came involvement in virtually every violent incident that occurred in his place of employment during the research period . . . The fact that being a bouncer involves dealing with violence means that our ethnographer was not able to lurk on the periphery and observe' (Winlow et al. 2001: 544, 546). Mattley's study of telephone sex line work: 'in 1993 I got a job working for a phone fantasy line, and conducted covert participant observation' (Mattley 2006: 142).
	Overt Full Member. Full membership of group but the researcher's status as a researcher is known. In other respects, same as Covert Full Member.	Simakova's study of the marketing of new technologies: 'Between February 2003 and July 2005, I conducted participant observation with Virtual World, one of the world's largest IT corporations, at the company's EMEA (Europe, the Middle East, and Africa) headquarters near London. I participated in preparations for RFID [Rapid Frequency Identification] launch by following a marketing manager, Alex, who was my "line manager" during most of my ethnography . . . While working with the corporation, I progressed through the department's hierarchy of marketing jobs: from postal room operations to becoming a project manager, and culminating in joining a prestigious marketing team' (Simakova 2010: 551, 572). Hodkinson's participant observation study of goths and their culture and lifestyle. 'I had been an enthusiastic participant in the goth scene since the beginning of [the 1990s], but in 1996 my personal involvement became one part of an extensive research project . . . I adopted a multi-method ethnographic approach, which included participant observation, in-depth interviews, media analysis and even a questionnaire . . . in some respects my insider status was actually enhanced, as the project was built around an intensified attendance of clubs, gigs and festivals across Britain . . . Participation on internet discussion groups and other goth internet facilities widened the scope of my research . . .' (Hodkinson 2002: 4–5).

Figure 19.2

(Continued)

Participation and Involvement	Type and description of role	Example studies
	Participating Observer. Participates in group's core activities but not as a full member. In closed settings like organizations, the researcher works for the concern often as part of a research bargain to gain entry or to gain acceptance; in open settings, the researcher is a regular in the vicinity and is involved fully in the principal activities.	Anderson's study, conducted in the 1970s, of Jelly's, a bar in Chicago, in order to understand the social lives of street corner black men: 'an understanding of the setting came to me in time, especially as I participated more fully in the life of the corner . . . As the ethnography progressed, I felt increasingly included in the activities of the group members, especially the regulars. I felt this inclusion especially during times when the group members would call my name in a familiar manner . . . People seemed more at ease with me, as I did with them . . . But probably the most important thing about my getting the trust of the men was my continued presence at Jelly's' (Anderson 2006: 45, 48, 54). Zilber's study of a rape crisis centre in Israel over a nineteen-month period: 'I spent at least two days per week in the center, observing board and staff meetings, volunteer gatherings, and weekend get-togethers. I also participated in the training course and served as a volunteer, answering calls and meeting with victims of sexual assaults. In addition to keeping a detailed field diary, I recorded meetings and daily discussions, which were later transcribed. For ethical reasons, I did not observe support sessions held by phone or in person. I used indirect sources—mainly volunteers' stories and the activity log—to learn about this aspect of the organization's life' (Zilber 2002: 239). In addition, she conducted thirty-six interviews with centre members and analysed organizational documents. Foster's study of Riverside, a London housing estate that was the focus of an intervention to improve perceptions of the estate and to reduce crime on Riverside and on some other estates: 'The fieldwork on the London estate was conducted between April 1987 and June 1990. Over that period I spent 18 months on Riverside getting involved in as many aspects of life there as possible from attending tenant meetings, the mothers and toddlers group, and activities for young people, to socializing with some of the residents in the local pub. I adopted an overt role and made initial contact with the Tenants Association. As my contacts developed I visited a small number of households on a regular basis and gradually extended my associations from the initial tenant group to other residents by "snowball" techniques, asking people to introduce me to others they knew on the estate. I also accompanied survey researchers conducting interviews for the "after" survey. In addition to my detailed observations I conducted extended interviews with 45 residents . . . on the two London estates (the majority of which were on Riverside) and 25 "officials" including police officers and housing staff' (Foster 1995: 566).

Figure 19.2

(Continued)

Participation and Involvement	Type and description of role	Example studies
	Partially Participating Observer. Same as Participating Observer, but observation is not necessarily the main data source. Interviews and documents can be as significant as observation and sometimes more significant as sources of data.	For her research on McDonald's, in addition to interviewing Leidner attended management training classes and was then placed in a franchised restaurant: 'The manager of the franchise arranged for me to be trained to serve customers; once trained, I worked without pay for half a dozen shifts, or a total of about twenty-eight hours of work . . . I also spent long hours hanging around the crew room, where I talked informally with workers . . . and listened as workers talked with each other about their experiences and their reactions to those experiences' (Leidner 1993: 16). Búriková and Miller's study of fifty Slovak au pairs in London in which the first-named author 'spent nearly every day of her year in London in the direct company of au pairs . . . Most of the au pairs spent the day in isolation looking after children and cleaning houses. Not surprisingly, they welcomed the presence of a fellow Slovak who could assist in these tasks. Zuzana's study often developed into more general friendships in which she shared a wide variety of experiences and confidences' (Búriková and Miller 2010: 3). In addition, all fifty au pairs were interviewed, and the researchers, who were both interested in material culture studies, 'paid particular attention to the details of how exactly they decorate their rooms within the family house' (Búriková and Miller 2010: 3).
	Minimally Participating Observer. Observes but participates minimally in group's core activities. Observer interacts with group members but observation may or may not be the main source of data. When observation is not the main source of data, interviews and documents play a prominent role.	Fine's study of the work of restaurant cooks: 'I conducted participant observation in four restaurants in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, spending a month observing and taking notes in each kitchen during all periods in which the restaurant was open . . . In each restaurant, I interviewed all full-time cooks, a total of thirty interviews . . . At no time did I "cook", but occasionally, when a need existed, I served as an extra pair of hands, occasionally peeling potatoes or destinging celery. Generally I would sit or stand in a corner of the kitchen and take notes, conversing with the cooks or servers in slow periods' (Fine 1996: 93, 94). Venkatesh's study of the Black Kings, a Chicago gang, led by J. T., who befriended him: 'I realized that if I truly wanted to understand the complicated lives of black youth in inner-city Chicago, I only had one good option: to accept J. T.'s counsel and hang out with people' (Venkatesh 2008: 22). However, for one day only, Venkatesh crossed the line and became gang leader for a day. However, it would be unwise to suggest that he became a Full Member on that day, because he was unwilling to engage in a physical confrontation on behalf of the Black Kings, when one was expected, and instead opted for a more intellectualized solution of the problem. Watts's research in a cancer drop-in centre: 'The opportunity to visit the centre and become an informal volunteer helping with social aspects of the drop-in sessions were a pre-cursor to the researcher role. For the

Figure 19.2

(Continued)

Participation and Involvement	Type and description of role	Example studies
LOW	Non-Participating Observer with Interaction. Observes (sometimes minimally) but does not participate in group's core activities. Interaction with group members occurs, but often tends to be through interviews, which, along with documents, tend to be the main source of data.	duration of the study my “volunteer time” was taken up with making tea, offering round cake and biscuits, setting up and joining in board games, playing cards, running quizzes, tidying up and generally chatting to those attending the sessions that run for three to four hours in the afternoon . . . The methods used were a mix of participant observation and informal conversations with users of the twice-weekly drop-in sessions . . . much of the data have been drawn, not from conversations between participants and myself, but from listening to talk between group members and from close observation of the social interaction within the group’ (Watts 2011 in press). Gambetta and Hammill’s study of taxi drivers and their fares in Belfast and New York (see Thinking Deeply 19.1). In the Belfast part of their study, the authors write that in addition to interviews: ‘We sat in the dispatch office of five different taxi companies and observed the dispatcher and the interaction between the drivers; we also drove around with five drivers while they were working’ (Gambetta and Hammill 2005: 21). Swain’s study of friendship groups in schools: ‘My descriptions and interpretations . . . are based on two major sources of data: firstly, my non-participant observations of the boys and girls during lessons, and around the school environs; and secondly, on a series of 104 loosely structured interviews . . . based on nominated friendship groups of between two and three pupils’ (Swain 2004: 169). A study by Valentine et al. of the strategies employed by pro-LGBT groups at the Anglican Communion’s Lambeth conference in Canterbury in 2008: ‘The research included recorded interviews and participant observation . . . The research team lived in Canterbury, and conducted a detailed ethnography of those elements of the event accessible to the public. Thirty semi-structured interviews (and less formal participant observation interviews) were conducted with a range of relevant actors . . . A researcher had access to the press room or conferences, and thus also conducted participant observation of the reporting of the conference as well as interviewing journalists formally about their approaches to this event’ (Valentine et al. 2010: 930). Gusterson’s study of a nuclear weapons laboratory (see Thinking deeply 19.4). The top-secret nature of the work meant that the primary sources of data were interviews and documents. However, he was given access to open areas: ‘although I was not allowed to wander freely around the areas where people do classified work, it was not entirely off-limits to me. Two of the laboratories’ three cafeterias were open to the public and I often ate lunch and met with laboratory employees in them’ (Gusterson 1996: 33).

levels of participation and involvement to exhibit a greater reliance on observation rather than interviewing and/or examination of documents; with lower levels of participation, there is a reversal with a greater reliance on interviewing and/or examination of documents and a lower level of reliance on observation.

Each role carries its own advantages and risks. The Full Member (Covert and Overt) and Participating Observer roles carry the risk of over-identification and hence of 'going native' (see Key concept 19.3), but offer the opportunity to get close to people and thereby glean a more complete and intense understanding of their culture and values. Which role is adopted is only partly a matter of choice. Not everyone has the credentials to be a Full Member so that they can become a bouncer (Winlow et al. 2001), a goth (Hodkinson 2002), or get hired by an IT company (Simakova 2010). Equally, the kind of access associated with being a Full Member would be very unlikely for someone like Gusterson (1996) for his study of a nuclear weapons laboratory or inconceivable for a study of school friendship groups because of age issues (Swain 2004). Also, the ethnographer's research questions are likely to be relevant in that they may or may not require an intensive examination of a particular social context.

Also, it is important to realize that ethnographers often move between these roles at different times during the life cycle of their research. Skeggs (1994) appears to have begun her research as a Participating Observer. She was supplementing her grant with some part-time teaching and gradually got to know her students—a group of young working-class women (eventually there were eighty-three of them) whom she realized were highly relevant to a doctoral project with a strong feminist orientation she was planning.

Over a period of three years [during 1980–3] I did the research by spending as much time as I could with the young women. . . . I traced the trajectories of the young women through the educational system and asked them for biographical details . . . I also conducted formal and informal interviews and meetings with family members, friends, partners and college teachers. . . . Obviously, it was physically impossible to do intensive participant observation with all eighty-three of them all of the time, so during the three years, I concentrated on different groups at different times. (Skeggs 1994: 72, 73)



Key concept 19.3

What is 'going native'?

'Going native' refers to a plight that is supposed sometimes to afflict ethnographers when they lose their sense of being a researcher and become wrapped up in the worldview of the people they are studying. The prolonged immersion of ethnographers in the lives of the people they study, coupled with the commitment to seeing the social world through their eyes, lie behind the risk and actuality of going native. Going native is a potential problem for several reasons but especially because the ethnographer can lose sight of his or her position as a researcher and therefore find it difficult to develop a social scientific angle on the collection and analysis of data. When Hobbs (1988: 6) writes in connection with his fieldwork on entrepreneurship in London's East End that he 'often had to remind himself that [he] was not in a pub to enjoy [himself] but to conduct an academic inquiry, and repeatedly woke up the following morning with an incredible hangover facing the dilemma of whether to bring it up or write it up', he may have been on the brink of going native.

However, it should not be assumed that going native is an inevitable risk associated with ethnography or indeed that it is the only risk to do with how participant observers relate to the social situations in which they find themselves. Lee-Treweek (2000) carried out research on auxiliary carers in two homes for the elderly. She describes how in one of these homes she had an almost completely opposite reaction to going native. She disliked the home and appears to have found the staff unappealing because of their lack of sympathy for and their uncaring approach to the elderly people for whom they were responsible. None the less, she felt that she 'was gathering good data, despite [her] feelings of being an outsider' (Lee-Treweek 2000: 120). The lesson of this story is that going native is not an inevitable accompaniment to ethnography.

She adds that the 'time spent doing the ethnography was so intense that the boundary between my life inside and outside the research dissolved' (1994: 73). Subsequently, she 'followed the women's progress through further interviews in 1985, 1989 and 1992' (1994: 73). As such, it is likely that she would have moved into something closer to a Non-Participating Observer with Interaction role. It is arguably the case that, even if it were possible to adopt a single ethnographic role over the entire course of a project, it is likely that it would be undesirable, because there would be a lack of flexibility in handling situations and people, and risks of excessive involvement (and hence of going native) or detachment would loom large. The issue of the kind of role(s) the ethnographer adopts is of considerable significance, because it has implications for field relationships in the various situations that are encountered.

Further, the kind of role adopted by an ethnographer is likely to have implications for his or her capacity to penetrate the surface layers of an organization. One of the strengths of organizational ethnography is that it offers the prospect of being able to find out what an organization is 'really' like, as opposed to how it formally depicts itself. For example, Michael Humphreys conducted ethnographic research in the UK headquarters of a US bank referred to pseudonymously as Credit Line (Humphreys and Watson 2009). He was aware of the firm's commitment to corporate social responsibility but became increasingly conscious that, although people working in the organization were publicly enthusiastic about its ethical stance, many were privately sceptical about the firm's actual commitment. For example, he quotes one employee (Charity) as saying:

My problem is that, in this organization, corporate social responsibility is a sham—it's just rhetoric—I mean how can we call ourselves responsible when we give credit cards to poor people and charge them 30 per cent APR [annual percentage rate] just because they are high risk? (in Humphreys and Watson 2009: 50)

For employees to divulge such private views which cast doubt on the integrity of their organization, the ethnographer will probably need to become something of a confidant, since it requires the organizational participants to be confident about sharing their private views which could lead to them being censured by senior managers.

Active or passive?

A further issue that is raised about any situation in which the ethnographer participates is the degree to which he or she should be or can be an active or a passive participant (Van Maanen 1978). Even when the ethnographer is in a predominantly non-observing role, there may be contexts in which either participation is unavoidable or a compulsion to join in a limited way may be felt, resulting in the ethnographer becoming a Minimally Participating Observer (see Figure 19.2). For example, Fine's (1996) research on the work of chefs in restaurants was carried out largely by semi-structured interview. In spite of his limited participation, he found himself involved in washing up in the kitchens to help out during busy periods. In many instances, the researcher has no choice. Researchers who do ethnographic research on the police, for example, unless they are covert observers like Holdaway (1982) or take steps to become police officers like Rubinstein (1973), are unlikely to be able to be active participants beyond offering fairly trivial assistance. An example of this can be found in an incident reported in Punch's field notes in connection with his research on the police in Amsterdam:

Tom wanted to move the cars which were blocking the narrow and busy street in front of the station, and said sternly to the suspect, but with a smile at me behind his back, "You stay here with your hands up and don't try anything because this detective here [pointing at me] is keeping an eye on you." I frowned authoritatively. (Punch 1979: 8)

Punch travelled with the officers in their cars but in civilian clothes and employed as a 'front' the role of a plain-clothes policeman. On the other side of the coin, in taking the job of a bouncer, the participant observer is not going to have the luxury of deciding whether to become involved in fights, since these are likely to come with the territory (Winlow et al. 2001).

Sometimes, ethnographers may *feel* they have no choice but to get involved, because a failure to participate actively might indicate to members of the social setting a lack of commitment and lead to a loss of credibility. Ryan (2009) conducted research on commercial cleaning in Australia and found that being prepared to help cleaners with some of their tasks helped to build up his credibility and made them more prepared to be interviewed by him.

However, participation in group activities can lead to dilemmas on the part of ethnographers, especially when the activities in which they actively take part (or might do so) are illegal or dangerous (see Research in focus 19.3). On the other hand, many writers counsel against active participation in criminal or dangerous activities (Polsky 1967). Both Armstrong (1993) and Giulianotti (1995; see Research in focus 19.2) refused to participate

in fights while doing research into football hooliganism. The latter writes: 'My own rules are that I will not get involved in fighting or become a go-between for the two gangs in organizing fights' (Giulianotti 1995: 10). Indeed, we see here a strong argument against covert research on criminals or those involved in dangerous activities, since it will be much more difficult for someone in such a role not to participate.



Research in focus 19.3

Active ethnography and illegal activity

In the context of his study of entrepreneurship (a euphemism for several kinds of legal and illegal activity) among East Enders in London, Hobbs (1988: 7, 15) admits he engaged in illegal activities:

A refusal, or worse still an enquiry concerning the legal status of the 'parcel', would provoke an abrupt conclusion to the relationship. Consequently, I was willing to skirt the boundaries of criminality on several occasions, and I considered it crucial to be willingly involved in 'normal' business transactions, legal or otherwise. I was pursuing an interactive, inductive study of an entrepreneurial culture, and in order to do so I had to display entrepreneurial skills myself. . . . [My] status as an insider meant that I was afforded a great deal of trust by my informants, and I was allowed access to settings, detailed conversations, and information that might not otherwise have been available.



Field notes

Because of the frailties of human memory, ethnographers have to take notes based on their observations. These should be fairly detailed summaries of events and behaviour and the researcher's initial reflections on them. The notes need to specify key dimensions of whatever is observed or heard. There are some general principles.

- Write down notes, however brief, as quickly as possible after seeing or hearing something interesting.
- Write up full field notes at the very latest at the end of the day and include such details as location, who is involved, what prompted the exchange or whatever, date and time of the day, and so on.
- Nowadays, people may prefer to use a digital recorder to record initial notes, but this may create a problem of needing to transcribe a lot of speech. However, see Tips and skills 'Dealing with digitally voice-recorded field notes'.
- Notes must be vivid and clear—you should not have to ask at a later date 'what did I mean by that?'
- It is worthwhile to write some personal reflections about your own feelings about occasions and people. Such notes may be helpful for formulating a reflexive account of fieldwork. Czarniawska (2007) provides a lot of field notes in connection with a study in Warsaw of what she calls Big City Management. She sought to shadow a finance director (as well as several others on different occasions) who was uncooperative, and these notes are revealing as much for the self-doubt and anxiety about her research skills that crept in as for the substantive findings conveyed.
- There is likely to be considerable value in including initial analytic thoughts about what is observed and heard. These may be useful for acting as a springboard for theoretical elaboration of the data.
- You need to take copious notes, so, if in doubt, write it down. The notes may be of different types (see below).



Tips and skills

Dealing with digitally voice-recorded field notes

Improvements in voice recognition software may make transcription unnecessary when a digital recording is made of spoken field notes. For example, at the time of writing there are free apps from Dragon, a company that specializes in such software, that can be downloaded through the iTunes Store onto an iPhone or iPad and will produce a document based on your speech. This document can be saved and later printed out. It would require close checking for errors of translation from voice to the written word.

Obviously, it can be very useful to take your notes down straight away—that is, as soon as something interesting happens. However, wandering around with a notebook and pencil in hand and scribbling notes down on a continuous basis runs the risk of making people self-conscious. It may be necessary, therefore, to develop strategies of taking small amounts of time out, though hopefully without generating the anxieties Ditton (1977) appears to have occasioned (see Research in focus 19.1).

To some extent, strategies for taking field notes will be affected by the degree to which the ethnographer enters the field with clearly delineated research questions. As noted in Chapter 17, most qualitative research adopts a general approach of beginning with general research questions (as specifically implied by Figure 17.1), but there is considerable variation in the degree to which this is the case. Obviously, when there is some specificity to a research question, ethnographers have to orient their observations to that research focus, but at the same time maintain a fairly open mind so that the element of flexibility that is such a strength of a qualitative research strategy is not eroded. Ditton (1977; Research in focus 19.1) provides an illustration of a very open-ended approach when he writes that his research ‘was not set up to answer any empirical questions’ (1977: 11). Similarly, in the context of her research on female drug-users, A. Taylor (1993: 15) explains that in her early days in the field she tended to listen rather than talk because she ‘did not know what questions [she] wanted to ask’. Armstrong (1993: 12) writes in connection with his research on football hooliganism that his research ‘began without a focus’ and that as a result ‘he decided to record everything’. As a result, a typical Saturday ‘would result in thirty sides of notes handwritten on A4 paper’. This

period of open-endedness usually cannot last long, because there is the temptation to try to record the details of absolutely everything, which can be very trying. Usually the ethnographer will begin to narrow down the focus of his or her research and to match observations to the emerging research focus. This approach is implied by the sequence suggested by Figure 17.1, and can be seen in the account by P. Atkinson (1981; see Research in focus 19.4). For these reasons, ethnographers frequently try to narrow down their focus of interest and to devise specific research questions or relate their emerging findings to the social scientific literature (see Research in focus 19.5).

For most ethnographers, the main equipment with which they will need to supply themselves in the course of observation will be a note pad and pen (see, e.g., Armstrong 1993: 28 and P. Atkinson 1981; see Research in focus 19.4). A recording device like a digital voice recorder can be another useful addition to the participant observer’s hardware, but, as suggested above, it is likely radically to increase the amount of transcription (though see Tips and skills ‘Dealing with digitally voice-recorded field notes’ above) and is possibly more obtrusive than writing notes. Most ethnographers report that after a period of time they become less conspicuous to participants in social settings, who become familiar with their presence (e.g. P. Atkinson 1981: 128). Speaking into a recording device may rekindle an awareness of the ethnographer’s presence. Also, in gatherings it may be difficult to use, because of the impact of extraneous noise. Photography can be an additional source of data and helps to stir the ethnographer’s memory, but it is likely that some kinds of research (especially involving crime and deviance) will render the taking of photographs unworkable.



Thinking deeply 19.1

Research questions in ethnographic research

As I noted in Chapter 17, research questions in qualitative research, and in ethnographic research in particular, are usually open ended, though the extent to which this is the case varies a great deal. Elijah Anderson (2006) has provided a fascinating account of the background to his participant observation research into the lives of black street corner men in Chicago in the 1970s (Anderson 1978). This study was undertaken by focusing on the lives and habits of clients of Jelly's—a drinking establishment that acted as both a bar and a store for the sale of alcoholic drinks. Anderson says that, at the outset of his fieldwork, he 'had absolutely no idea where the research would lead' and had 'no explicit sociological problem or question' (2006: 40). Indeed, he writes that 'this open-ended approach was a conscious act', arguing that to go in with a pre-designed set of issues 'could preclude certain lines of enquiry that might prove valuable later' (2006: 40). Gradually, the research questions emerged: 'Why did men really come to and return to Jelly's corner? What did they seek to gain? What was the nature of the social order there? What was the basis for their social ranking?' (2006: 46).

Anderson's open-ended strategy can be interestingly contrasted with a study of taxi drivers in New York and Belfast whose data are described as 'of an ethnographic kind' (Gambetta and Hamill 2005: 18). The researchers were fundamentally interested in the sociological study of trust and sought to explore how taxi drivers establish whether prospective passengers that they might pick up are trustworthy. Taxi drivers are very vulnerable in many ways: the passenger may not pay or worse may rob the driver or even worse may rob and assault the driver. Therefore, they are forced to make more or less instant decisions about whether someone who hails them is trustworthy. Their hypothesis is worth quoting: '*drivers screen passengers looking for reliable signs of trust- or distrust-warranting properties*, in the sense that they look for signs that are too costly for a mimic to fake but affordable for the genuine article' (Gambetta and Hamill 2005: 11; emphasis in original).

To investigate this explicit research question, Gambetta and Hamill (2005: 18) conducted 'partially structured interviews and participant observation with drivers, dispatchers, and passengers'. Unlike Anderson's initially open-ended strategy, where research questions emerged in the course of the study, Gambetta and Hamill collected their data to examine the validity of their research question, which they also refer to as a hypothesis. Their findings are presented in order to shed light on this research question, and new research questions do not appear to have emerged in the course of the study.

On a personal note, I have an impression that an open-ended approach of the kind used by Anderson is less frequently seen than in the past. That is not to say that researchers veer towards the highly explicit formulation that we see in Gambetta and Hamill's study but that there is a greater tendency towards explicitness nowadays. I suspect that this is often to do with the expectations of research funding bodies when deciding whether to fund investigations and perhaps also to do with the expectations of journals. It may also be to do with the expectations of committees that review the ethical integrity of proposed projects, because securing ethical clearance forces the researcher to be clear about what he or she intends to do and why. However, this is an impression only—maybe it could be called a hypothesis!



Research in focus 19.4

Taking field notes: encounters with doctors and patients in a medical school training programme

In the context of his research in a medical school, P. Atkinson (1981: 131–2) provides an account that strongly implies that ethnographers need to be flexible in their note-taking tactics:

I found that my strategies for observation and recording changed naturally as the nature of the social scene changed. Whenever possible I attempted to make rough notes and jottings of some sort whilst I was in the

field. Such notes were then amplified and added to later in the day when I returned to the office. The quantity and type of on the spot recording varied across recurrent types of situation. During 'tutorials', when one of the doctors taught the group in a more or less formal manner, or when there was some group discussion . . . then it seemed entirely natural and appropriate to sit among the students with my notebook on my knee and take notes almost continuously. At the other extreme, I clearly did not sit with my notebook and pen whilst I was engaged in casual conversations with students over a cup of coffee. Whereas taking notes is a normal thing to do, taking notes during a coffee break chat is not normal practice. . . . Less clear cut was my approach to the observation and recording of bedside teaching. On the whole I tried to position myself at the back of the student group and make occasional jottings: main items of information on the patients, key technical terms, and brief notes on the shape of the session (for example, the sequence of topics covered, the students who were called on to perform, and so on).



Research in focus 19.5

Narrowing the focus of an ethnography

Ruth Horowitz has written about the process of narrowing down the focus of her research on groups on the margins of society in Gerson and Horowitz (2002). As she puts it, she tends to be interested in such questions as:

'What is really going on' in such groups and communities? How do people make sense of their social worlds? How do they strike a balance between group membership and wider social participation? And finally, what limits and what helps create the social worlds of the people? (Gerson and Horowitz 2002: 202)

In her early research on young people in a very poor community in Chicago, she used these general research questions to guide her data collection but 'began to focus on specifying the sociological issues only after some time in the field' (Gerson and Horowitz 2002: 202). She found a great deal of variety in the ambitions, orientations, patterns of interaction, attitudes towards street life, and behaviour in different settings among the young people she observed. Horowitz began to ask questions about how well the world of these young people fitted with two prominent models used to explain the worlds of the poor. Her research questions about the degree of fit between these models and her data led her to conclude that the models 'failed to account for young people's creativity or for the struggles they mounted and the choices that they made in the face of great obstacles' (Gerson and Horowitz 2002: 202).

Types of field notes

Some writers have found it useful to classify the types of field notes that are generated in the process of conducting an ethnography. The following classification is based on the similar categories suggested by Sanjek (1990) and Lofland and Lofland (1995).

- *Mental notes*—particularly useful when it is inappropriate to be seen taking notes (for example, during the coffee breaks referred to by P. Atkinson in Research in focus 19.4).
- *Jotted notes* (also called *scratch notes*)—very brief notes written down on pieces of paper or in small notebooks to jog one's memory about events that should be written up later. Lofland and Lofland (1995: 90) refer to these as being made up of 'little phrases, quotes, key words, and the like'. They need to be jotted down inconspicuously, preferably out of sight, since detailed note taking in front of people may make them self-conscious. These are equivalent to the 'rough notes and jottings' that P. Atkinson refers to in Research in focus 19.4.
- *Full field notes*—detailed notes, made as soon as possible, which will be your main data source. They should be written at the end of the day or sooner if possible. Write as promptly and as fully as possible.

Write down information about events, people, conversations, and so on. Write down initial ideas about interpretation. Record impressions and feelings. When P. Atkinson (in *Research in focus* 19.4) refers to notes in which he ‘amplified and added to’ the jottings made during the day, he was producing full field notes. An example of a full field note is provided in *Research in focus* 19.6.

It is worth adding that field notes are often to do with the ethnographer as well as with the social setting being observed. It is frequently in field notes that the ethnographer’s presence is evident. We see this in the field note on page 446 from Punch’s study of police work, in which he confirms his (false) status as a plain-clothes officer, and in the field note in *Research in focus* 19.6, when he lends

support to letting the cyclist go. Precisely because they record the quotidian as observed and experienced by ethnographers, it is here that ethnographers come to the surface. In the finished work—the ethnography in the sense of a written account of a group and its culture—the ethnographer is frequently written out of the picture (Van Maanen 1988). A major difference here is that field notes, except for brief passages like those taken from Punch’s work, are invariably for personal consumption (Coffey 1999), whereas the written ethnography is for public consumption and has to be presented as a definitive account of the social setting and culture in question. To keep on allowing the ethnographer to surface in the text risks conveying a sense of the account as an artifice rather than an authoritative chronicle. This issue will be addressed in further detail below.



Research in focus 19.6

A field note: police work in Amsterdam

Punch’s (1979) ethnographic research on police work in Amsterdam was briefly mentioned above. One of the ideas he developed was the way in which police officers often cultivated distinctive styles of working. One of them, Anton, was inflexible and therefore disinclined to use his discretion (perhaps because he was new to the work), as the following passage from Punch’s field notes suggests:

Once Jan had been sitting inside for a couple of hours doing nothing and was desperate to get out. He was sent out in a car with a newcomer, Anton. The three of us stepped outside the station and immediately saw a young man cycling erratically the wrong way down the Warmoesstraat which is a one-way street. Anton stopped him, smelt his breath, and ordered him to leave the bike and walk home. The man refused and Anton threatened to take him inside and book him for being drunk on a bike [under an article normally applied to car-drivers and almost never used for cyclists]. Jan pleaded with Anton to let the man go so that we could get out on patrol. I also added support to Jan’s plea. But Anton was adamant and took the youth inside where the brigadier talked the cyclist into seeing reason and proceeding by foot. (Punch 1979: 110–11)

There is also an issue of how far the ethnographer should aim to be comprehensive in how much is recorded. Wolfinger (2002) has observed that, if the ethnographer does not seek to be comprehensive, his or her background expectations are likely to influence what is or is not recorded. He suggests that the ethnographer may be particularly inclined to make a note of events that stand out and what is taken to stand out is likely to be influenced by other events that have been observed or by the ethnographer’s expectations of what is likely to happen. It may be that what stood out for Punch in the field note in *Research in focus* 19.6 is that it was an unusual event—a cyclist going down a one-way street in

the wrong direction—which produced a typically rigid response from Anton that made it noteworthy.

Sometimes, field notes may seem to describe incidents that are so mundane that they seem barely worth recording. For example, the following field note is taken from Watts’s (2008) study of train travel. The idea of ‘mobile ethnography’ has garnered interest as social geographers and sociologists have become increasingly interested in studying people on the move and in the research methods that might be employed. She travelled on the same train service once a week over three weeks. In her field note she writes:

Nothing seems to happen . . . I want to write that something happens. But nothing happens. A man reads a book, then reads a newspaper. A woman fidgets and sniffs . . . A cloud catches me and I drift off, dreaming of my destination . . . I am drifting into reverie, the flashing light, the tiredness, the endless munching of crisps from nearby, the reading, reading . . . the juddering, the rolling of the carriage, the white light of Cornwall. I am travelling outside the train, through the fields, as though the carriage were air on which I was carried, blown along . . . (Watts 2008: 713)

The sense of *ennui* is unmistakable and hardly seems worth recording. However, quite apart from providing insight into her own experience of train travel, Watts also reveals the tediousness of the experience of train travel for others. While she reports some things that did happen, they are not striking or colourful. As a result, ethnographers in such circumstances have to be on their guard to allow the dullness of the experience to come through but not to get sucked into the boredom so that they lose sight of recording it in their field notes.



Bringing ethnographic research to an end

Knowing when to stop is not an easy or straightforward matter in ethnography. Because of its unstructured nature and the absence of specific hypotheses to be tested (other than those that might emerge during data collection and analysis), there is a tendency for ethnographic research to lack a sense of an obvious end point. But clearly ethnographic research does come to an end! It may be that there is an almost natural end to the research, such as in Waddington's study of a strike (see Research in focus 17.4), but this is a fairly rare occurrence. Sometimes, the rhythms of the ethnographer's occupational career or personal and family life will necessitate withdrawal from the field. Such factors include: the end of a period of sabbatical leave; the need to write up and submit a doctoral thesis by a certain date; or funding for research drawing to a close. As regards family and personal commitments, for example, Taylor (1993) writes that one of the factors that was instrumental in her departure from the field was an illness of her youngest son that lasted many months.

Moreover, ethnographic research can be highly stressful for many reasons: the nature of the topic, which places the fieldworker in stressful situations (as in research on crime); the marginality of the researcher in the social setting and the need constantly to manage a front; and the prolonged absence from one's normal life that is often necessary. The ethnographer may feel that he or she has simply had enough. A further possibility that may start to bring about moves to bring fieldwork to

a close is that the ethnographer may begin to feel that the research questions on which he or she has decided to concentrate are answered, so that there are no new data worth generating. The ethnographer may even feel a strong sense of *déjà vu* towards the end of data collection. Altheide (1980: 310) has written that his decision to leave the various news organizations in which he had conducted ethnographic research was often motivated by 'the recurrence of familiar situations and the feeling that little worthwhile was being revealed'. In the language of grounded theory, all the researcher's categories were *saturated*, although Glaser and Strauss's approach would invite you to be certain that there are no new research questions to be asked or no new comparisons to be made or no new theoretical insights to be developed.

The reasons for bringing ethnographic research to a close can involve a wide range of factors from the personal to matters of research design. Whatever the reason, disengagement has to be *managed*. For one thing, this means that promises must be kept, so that, if you promised a report to an organization as a condition of entry, that promise should not be forgotten. It also means that ethnographers must provide good explanations for their departure. Members of a social setting always know that the researcher is a temporary fixture, but over a long period of time, and especially if there was genuine participation in activities within that setting, people may forget that the ethnographer's presence is finite. The

farewells have to be managed and in an orderly fashion. Also, the ethnographer's *ethical* commitments must not be forgotten, such as the need to ensure that persons and settings are anonymized—unless, of course, as sometimes happens, there has been an agreement that the nature of the social setting can be disclosed (as often occurs in the study of religious sects and cults).

Michael Humphreys, in his research on Credit Line, which was referred to above, went even further in his desire for organizational participants to remain anonymous (Humphreys and Watson 2009). He became aware that the gulf between the company's public position on

corporate social responsibility and the private views of many staff about that position presented him with an ethical dilemma in that he clearly needed to protect their anonymity so that they would not get into trouble with the firm. On page 446, the words of 'Charity' were quoted, but Charity is not a pseudonym, the usual tactic used by researchers to preserve the identity of their informants. 'Charity' is a composite person rather than a real person. Her views and words are in fact an aggregation of those of several employees who expressed identical or similar positions.



Can there be a feminist ethnography?

This heading is in fact the title of a widely cited article by Stacey (1988). It is a rebuttal of the view that there is and/or can be a distinctively feminist ethnography that both draws on the distinctive strengths of ethnography and is informed by feminist tenets of the kind outlined at the end of Chapter 17. Reinharz (1992) sees feminist ethnography as significant in terms of feminism, because:

- it documents women's lives and activities, which were previously largely seen as marginal and subsidiary to men's;
- it understands women from their perspective, so that the tendency that 'trivializes females' activities and thoughts, or interprets them from the standpoint of men in the society or of the male researcher' (Reinharz 1992: 52), is militated against; and
- it understands women in context.

Similarly, Skeggs (2001: 430) has observed that ethnography, 'with its emphasis on experiences and the words, voice and lives of the participants', has been viewed by many feminist researchers as well suited to the goals of feminism. Reinharz's principles lay behind Mattley's (2006) choice of participant observation for collecting data on working for a sex fantasy phone line in order to explore the notion of emotional labour (see Research in focus 17.1 for a brief discussion of the emergence of this concept). She writes:

I knew that as a feminist my goals were to understand the phone workers' experiences, to document their experiences using their own words and perspectives, and to understand how their emotional labor was a part of their work context. I also knew that understanding their experiences from their own point of view was important to challenge the dominant sociological view of sex workers as deviants, which has most often been written by male sociologists. (Mattley 2006: 143)

However, such commitments and practices go only part of the way. Of great significance to feminist researchers is the question of whether the research allows for a non-exploitative relationship between researcher and researched. One of the main elements of such a strategy is that the ethnographer does not treat the relationship as a one-way process of extracting information from others, but actually provides something in return.

Skeggs's (1994, 1997) account of her ethnographic research on young women, which was briefly mentioned in Chapter 17, represents an attempt to address this issue of a non-exploitative relationship when women conduct ethnographic research on other women (see Research in focus 19.7). J. Stacey (1988: 23), however, argues, on the basis of her fieldwork experience, that the various

situations she encountered as a feminist ethnographer placed her

in situations of inauthenticity, dissimilitude, and potential, perhaps inevitable betrayal, situations that I now believe are inherent in fieldwork method. For no matter how welcome, even enjoyable the fieldworker's presence may appear to 'natives', fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer to leave.

The young women were not prepared to be exploited; just as they were able to resist most things which did not promise economic or cultural reward, they were able to resist me. . . . They enjoyed the research. It provided resources for developing a sense of their self-worth. More importantly, the feminism of the research has provided a framework which they use to explain that their individual problems are part of a wider structure and not their personal fault. (Skeggs 1994: 88)

Stacey also argues that, when the research is written up, it is the feminist ethnographer's interpretations and judgements that come through and that have authority. Skeggs responds to this general charge against feminist ethnography by acknowledging in the case of her own study that her academic career was undoubtedly enhanced by the research, but argues that Stacey's views construe women as victims. Instead, she argues:

Similarly, Reinharz (1992: 74–5) argues that, although ethnographic fieldwork relationships may sometimes *seem* manipulative, a clear undercurrent of reciprocity often lies beneath them. The researcher, in other words, may offer help or advice to her research participants, or she may be exhibiting reciprocity by giving a public airing to normally marginalized voices (although the ethnographer is always the mouthpiece for such voices and may be imposing a particular 'spin' on them). Moreover, it seems extreme to abandon feminist ethnography



Research in focus 19.7

A feminist ethnography

Skeggs (1997: 1) refers to 'the 83 White working-class women of this longitudinal ethnographic study, set in the North West of England' and writes that it was

based on research conducted over a total period of 12 years including three years' full-time, in-the-field participant observation. It began when the women enrolled on a 'caring' course at a local college and it follows their trajectories through the labour market, education and the family.

The elements of a distinctively feminist ethnography can be seen in the following comments:

- 'This ethnography was politically motivated to provide space for the articulations and experiences of the marginalized' (Skeggs 1997: 23).
- The 'study was concerned to show how young women's experience of structure (their class and gender positioning) and institutions (education and the media) framed and informed their responses and how this process informed constructions of their own subjectivity' (Skeggs 1994: 74). This comment, like the previous one, reflects the commitment to documenting women's lives and allowing their experiences to come through, while also pointing to the significance of the understanding of women in context, to which Reinharz (1992) refers.

Skeggs also feels that the relationship with the women was not an exploitative one. For example, she writes that the research enabled the women's 'sense of self-worth' to be 'enhanced by being given the opportunity to be valued, knowledgeable and interesting' (Skeggs 1994: 81). She also claims she was able to 'provide a mouthpiece against injustices' and to listen 'to disclosures of violence, child abuse and sexual harassment' (Skeggs 1994: 81).

on the grounds that the ethnographer cannot fulfil all possible obligations simultaneously. Indeed, this would be a recipe for the abandonment of all research, feminist or otherwise. What is also crucial is transparency—transparency in the feminist ethnographer's dealings with the

women she studies and transparency in the account of the research process, both of which are a great strength in Skeggs's work. Nonetheless, it is clear that the question of whether there is or can be a feminist ethnography is a matter of ongoing debate.



The rise of visual ethnography

One of the most striking developments in qualitative research in recent years has been the growth of interest in the use of visual materials. The use of such materials in social research is by no means new; for example, social anthropologists have made use of photographs of the tribes and villages in which they resided for many decades. In sociology, it was not uncommon to encounter articles that made use of photographs in the *American Journal of Sociology* at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. However, from around the time of the First World War, their use fell away. One factor in this loss of interest in the use of photographs is likely to have been a feeling that their inclusion was inconsistent with the discipline's growing scientific pretensions. However, in recent years, there is a clear sense that the use of visual materials in social research has entered a new phase of interest that can be discerned in the number of books that appeared around the turn of the millennium on this area (Banks 2001; Pink 2001; Rose 2001).

Photographs did not disappear completely from the outputs of social scientists, of course. Particularly in book-length monographs, photographs could sometimes be found. For example, Blauner's (1964) well-known book on alienated work under different technological conditions contained several photographs that were used to illustrate each of the technologies. Of particular significance is that the photographs were accompanied by quite detailed captions that more or less informed readers of what they were seeing in the images. These photographs were essentially being presented as having uncontested meanings, which was very much in tune with the realist stance on visual images (see Thinking deeply 19.2 on the distinction between realist and reflexive approaches to visual materials and Thinking deeply 19.3 for more on issues relating to Blauner's use of photographs).

A distinction can be made between the use of visual materials that are *extant* and those that are produced more or less exclusively for the purposes of research. The

former will be featured in Chapter 23 and take the form of such artefacts as people's collections of photographs and images in newspapers and magazines. In this chapter I will be emphasizing research-driven visual images, and my main focus will be upon photographs. Visual images that are research driven may be taken either by the researcher or by the research participants themselves. In either case, the images may be used as a basis for what is often referred to as **photo-elicitation**, whereby the researcher uses the images as a springboard for discussion with the producers of the photographs concerning the meaning and significance of the images (see Research in focus 19.9 for an example). Wright et al. (2010) equipped African Caribbean young people who had been excluded from school with disposable cameras and instructed them to take photographs of family and friends who had been sources of support. The researcher wanted to understand how the young people managed their transition into adulthood. The images tended to be of events and contexts that were significant at that particular juncture of their lives and that were therefore significant for the development of their personal identities. The authors argue that the use of a visual research approach helped to empower these marginalized young people and to reduce some of the power distance between the researchers and their participants. Photo-elicitation is often employed in connection with extant images too, and this point will be addressed further in Chapter 23.

The distinction between extant and research-driven visual materials is not an entirely satisfactory one. For example, when research participants are asked to discuss items in their photograph collections, this is similar to asking participants to take photographs and then to discuss the images that are taken. However, in order to restrict the discussion of documents in Chapter 23 only to items that have *not* been produced for research purposes, the distinction is required.

It is also worth observing that, although the term 'visual ethnography' is becoming increasingly popular (e.g. Peñaloza 1999; Pink 2001), it is sometimes used in



Research in focus 19.8

Researching Disneyization

I have been intrigued by something that I call 'Disneyization', which refers to the process by which the principles associated with the Disney theme parks have permeated many aspects of modern society and economy. In my book on Disneyization (Bryman 2004a) I included several photographs that I felt illustrated the processes I was describing quite well. In addition to serving this role, the photographs were very helpful in acting as reminders of contexts that revealed the process of Disneyization for me. This was especially the case with an article I wrote on the Disneyization of McDonald's (Bryman 2003). At one point in this article I discussed the rather bizarre case of a themed McDonald's in Chicago that employed a rock 'n' roll narrative. I had visited Chicago a year previously to give a paper at the American Sociological Association conference and took the opportunity to take some photographs of the restaurant. These images were very helpful in remembering the restaurant, although I did not use them for illustrative purposes in either the book or the article. Two of the images are presented here—Plate 19.1 shows the restaurant's exterior against the Chicago skyline and Plate 19.2 shows statues of three members of the Beatles, which were among many other artefacts that contributed to the musical theme.

Plate 19.1

Disneyization in pictures: a themed McDonald's



Plate 19.2

Disneyization in pictures: The Beatles in the themed McDonald's



a way that does not imply the kind of sustained immersion in a social setting that has been taken in this chapter to be a feature of ethnography. Sometimes, the term is used to include interviews of the kind covered in Chapter 20 in which visual materials figure prominently. However, in order to avoid splitting visual resources and research methods across too many chapters, I have located the discussion of their use in qualitative research in this chapter.

In the discussion that follows, I will emphasize photographs, mainly because they are the visual medium that have received the greatest attention. There are a number of ways in which photographs have been employed by qualitative researchers.

- As an *aide-mémoire* in the course of fieldwork, in which context the images essentially become components of the ethnographer's field notes. This is how I have tended to use images in my own work (see Research in focus 19.8).
- As sources of data in their own right and not simply as adjuncts to the ethnographer's field notes (see Research in focus 19.10).
- As prompts for discussion by research participants. Sometimes the photographs may be extant, and this kind of context will be examined in Chapter 23. In other contexts, the discussions may be based on photographs taken by the ethnographer or by research participants (see Research in focus 19.9) more or less exclusively for the purposes of the investigation. In the case of photographs that are taken by research participants and that form the basis for an interview or discussion, Pink (2004: 399) writes: 'By working with informants to produce images that are meaningful for them we can gain insights into their visual cultures and into what is important for them as individuals living in particular localities.'

Pink (2001) draws attention to two different ways in which visual images have been conceptualized in social

research. She calls these the *realist* and *reflexive* approaches (see Thinking deeply 19.2). The latter approach to the visual is frequently collaborative, in the sense that research participants may be involved in decisions about what photographs should be taken and then how they should be interpreted. Further, there is a recognition of the fluidity of the meaning of images, implying that they can never be fixed and will always be viewed by different

people in different ways. Thus, in Pink's research on Spanish bullfighters, the images she took of bullfights were interpreted by enthusiasts in terms of their performative qualities of the bullfighter. UK viewers of the images employed a different interpretative frame to do with animal rights and cruelty. Further examples of the use of visual resources in ethnographic contexts can be found in Thinking deeply 19.2 and Research in focus 19.10.



Thinking deeply 19.2

Two stances on the role of visual images in ethnography

Pink (2001) draws an important distinction between two positions on visual materials. The traditional framework is a *realist* one (see Key concept 2.3 on realism) in which the photograph or video recording simply captures an event or setting that then becomes a 'fact' for the ethnographer to interpret along with his or her other data. The image and what it represents are essentially unproblematic and act as a window on reality. This has been the dominant frame within which visual resources have been produced and analysed. Researchers who employ photographic images to illustrate their work or as adjuncts to their field notes typically operate within a realist frame of reference that treats the image as relatively unproblematic (see Research in focus 19.8 and Thinking deeply 19.3 for examples). In contrast, Pink draws attention to a position that she calls *reflexive*, which entails an awareness of and sensitivity to the ways in which the researcher as a person has an impact on what a photograph reveals. This sensitivity requires a grasp of the way that one's age, gender, background, and academic proclivities influence what is photographed, how it is composed, and the role that informants and others may have played in influencing the resulting image.

The various examples of the use of visual materials give a sense that they have great potential for ethnographers and qualitative researchers more generally. Their growing popularity should not entice readers into thinking that visual methods should necessarily be incorporated into their investigations: their use must be relevant to the research questions being asked. For her research on Niketown in Chicago, Peñaloza (1999; Research in focus 19.10) was interested in what she dubs 'spectacular consumption'—that is, turning what could otherwise be a mundane consumption event (purchasing sportswear) into a spectacle through the use of sporting images, sounds, and atmospheres. When she explored research questions to do with this topic (for example, the role of the environment in creating a sense of spectacular consumption), an approach that included photography was very appropriate, since spectacle is a visual phenomenon.

As sources of data, visual research methods require an ability on the part of the researcher to 'read' images in a manner that is sensitive to: the context in which they were generated; the potential for multiple meanings

that may need to be worked through with research participants; and, where the researcher is the source of the images, the significance of his or her own social position. In other words, the analyst of visual materials needs to be sceptical about the notion that a photograph provides an unproblematic depiction of reality. In addition, researchers will usually include non-visual research methods in their investigations (such as interviews). This leads to the question of the relative significance of words and images in the analysis of data and the presentation of findings. Since words are the traditional medium, it is easy to slip into seeing the visual as ancillary.

However, at the same time, Pink (2004) reminds us that visual research methods are never purely visual. There are two aspects to this point. First, as Pink points out, visual research methods are usually accompanied by other (often traditional) research methods such as interviewing and observation. Second, the visual is almost always accompanied by the non-visual—words—that are the medium of expression for both the research participants and the researchers themselves.



Research in focus 19.9

Photographs in a study of the experience of homelessness

Radley et al. (2005) were interested in the ways in which homeless people visualize their lives. They were especially interested in how their lives are visualized in the context both of their hostels and on the streets of London. Following an initial interview, twelve homeless people were each given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs 'that represented their experience of being a homeless person. They were told that photographs could be of key times in their day, of typical activities and spaces, or of anything else that portrayed their situation' (Radley et al. 2005: 277). The films were developed shortly after the photographs had been taken, and the participants were interviewed shortly after that. On each occasion, participants were asked about all the photographs and which ones best expressed their experience of being a homeless person. This approach to interviewing—namely, asking people to discuss photographs and their meaning and significance for them—is often referred to as the technique of *photo-elicitation*. Plates 19.3 and 19.4 provide examples of the kinds of photograph that were taken. The photograph in Plate 19.3 was taken by Rose (the names are pseudonyms) and shows the entrance to her day centre. For Rose, this photograph had significance because it is where she is welcomed and where she welcomes others and where she is given the opportunity to move between her two worlds—as someone who sleeps rough at night but who during the day is able to mix with others with more conventional lives in terms of having jobs and homes. The photograph in Plate 19.4 was taken by Mary, who, unlike Rose, did not sleep rough at night, as she made use of a hostel that was in fact close to Rose's day centre. For Mary, this photograph took on significance because it 'shows us a community of friends who share not only

Plate 19.3

Images of homelessness



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a place [referred to as The Wall situated on Vauxhall Bridge Road] but also an activity—drinking' (Radley et al. 2005: 283; note how the faces are pixelated to protect the individuals in the photographs). The photographs and the discussions of them by the participants provide insights into the experience of homelessness and how the homeless navigate an identity in a world in which homelessness is on the fringes of society.

Plate 19.4

Images of homelessness



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Research in focus 19.10

Visual ethnography? Just do it

Peñaloza (1999) conducted what she calls a 'visual ethnographic' study of Niketown in Chicago. The Niketowns are huge stores that act as showcases for Nike's products and can be found in many large cities worldwide, including one in London on Oxford Street. She was interested in the store as a spectacle that has been designed specifically for the consumer and that is meant to create a sense of awe. Peñaloza (1999: 34) argues that an approach that included photography was well suited to her research, given her interest in the environment within which consumption occurred, 'particularly its architecture, furnishings, displays of artifacts, images, sounds and textures in relation to consumers' behaviors'. Her corpus of data included: 148 pages of field notes; 58 pages of entries in a diary; and 357 photographs. In addition, interviews were conducted with employees and consumers. Through her data, Peñaloza shows, for example, that the display of artefacts and images of revered athletes are deployed to transfer the sense of power and awe in which these individuals are held to Nike as a corporation.



Thinking deeply 19.3

Copyright and photographs

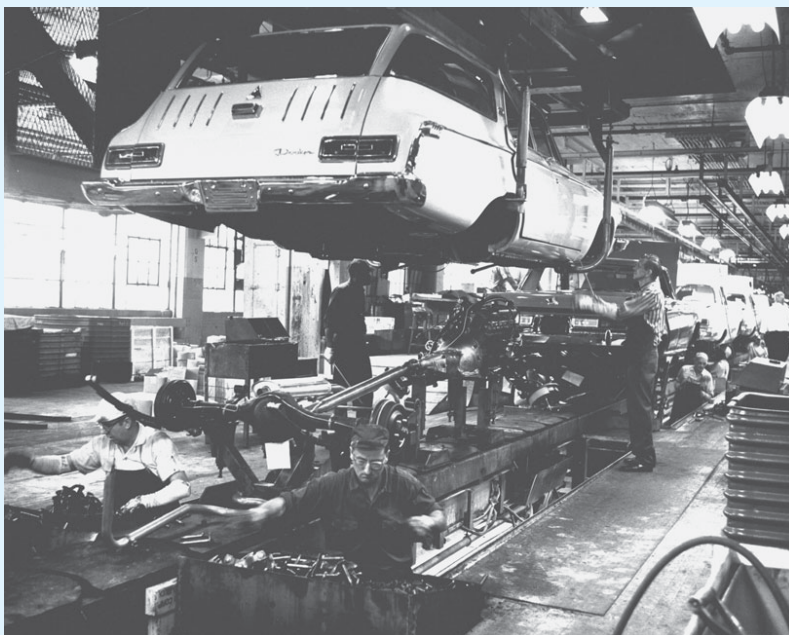
An interesting fairly early use of photographs can be found in Blauner's (1964) influential book on work in four different technological conditions. Blauner used photographs to illustrate each of the four technologies and the kinds of work with which each was associated. They are very memorable photographs, which were accompanied by a detailed description of the work beneath the image. I wanted to include a photograph very similar to the one in Plate 19.5 to demonstrate Blauner's use of photographs to illustrate assembly-line work in the automobile industry in the USA in the 1950s and early 1960s. Blauner's photograph had the title 'Subdivided jobs and restricted freedom' and was accompanied by a description of employees' work and the following comment:

These men perform the identical tasks shown above all day long and may fasten from eight hundred to one thousand wheels in eight hours. The movement of the cars along the conveyor belt determines the pace of their work and kept them close to their stations, virtually 'chained' to the assembly line. (Blauner 1964: 112)

Thus, Blauner used the image to illustrate the work of assembly-line workers and was operating very much within a realist view of the role of the photograph. I write above that Plate 19.5 is 'very similar', because it proved impossible to track the owner of the image. In Blauner's book the image he used is described as 'Courtesy of the

Plate 19.5

The automobile assembly line



Courtesy of Chrysler Group LLC.

Chrysler Corporation'. However, Chrysler's archivists could not find the photograph and therefore could not provide us with permission to use it. However, they were kind enough to allow me to use the image in Plate 19.5. This anecdote demonstrates some of the difficulties with the use of photographs in general and of older ones in particular. Sometimes, authors and publishers include photographs even when they are unable to track down the copyright owner and usually cover themselves with a general statement like: every effort has been made to find the owner of the copyright but if anyone believes they are the copyright owner please contact the publisher. This option was not available to us, because the photographs in Blauner's book were of poor quality.

Finally, visual research methods raise especially difficult issues of ethics, an area that is explored in Chapter 6. The Visual Sociology Group, a study group of the British Sociological Association (BSA), has provided a statement of ethical practice for researchers using visual research methods:

www.visualsociology.org.uk/BSA_VS_ethical_statement.pdf (accessed 12 October 2010).

This is a useful statement, which draws on the BSA's *Statement of Ethical Practice*, which was referred to in Chapter 6. Here are some statements of ethical practice that are recommended:

Researchers may want to discuss the status of the images with participants in order to clearly explain the dissemination strategy of the research project. In certain circumstances, the researcher(s) may want to create a written or verbal contract guaranteeing the participants ownership of the images produced. Under UK law copyright can be waived by participants and given to the researcher(s); however it is recommended that researchers read the current legislation or seek legal advice if taking this option (please note that the date of the creation of the image affects the legal status).

As far as possible participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used. Here again clarity about the status and ownership of visual data will benefit the participants and the reputation of the discipline.

As these points reveal, there is a special sensitivity to the use of visual materials, like photographs, in that the subjects who appear in them may have their images widely disseminated. It is important, therefore, to ensure that permission is gained from those whose images appear and that they are fully aware of the implications of that agreement. If you are considering using visual research methods, you should consult this statement of ethical practice.



Writing ethnography

The term 'ethnography' is interesting, because it refers both to a method of social research and to the finished product of ethnographic research. In other words, it is both something that is carried out in doing research and something that one reads. Since around the mid-1980s, the production of ethnographic texts has become a focus of interest in its own right associated with what Denzin and Lincoln (2005b: 20) call 'the postmodern period of ethnographic writing' (see Thinking deeply 17.1). This means that there has been a growth of interest not just in how ethnography is carried out in the field but also in the

rhetorical conventions employed in the production of ethnographic texts.

Ethnographic texts are designed to convince readers of the *reality* of the events and situations described, and the plausibility of the ethnographer's explanations. The ethnographic text must not simply present a set of findings: it must provide an 'authoritative' account of the group or culture in question. In other words, the ethnographer must convince us that he or she has arrived at an account of social reality that has strong claims to truth.

The ethnographic text is permeated by stylistic and rhetorical devices whereby the reader is persuaded to enter into a shared framework of facts and interpretations, observations and reflections. The ethnographer typically works within a writing strategy that is imbued with **realism**. This simply means that the researcher presents an authoritative, dispassionate account that represents an external, objective reality. Van Maanen (1988) called ethnographic writing that conforms to these characteristics *realist tales*, but he distinguished two other types:

1. *Realist tales*—apparently definitive, confident, and dispassionate third-person accounts of a culture and of the behaviour of members of that culture. This is the most prevalent form of ethnographic writing.
2. *Confessional tales*—personalized accounts in which the ethnographer is fully implicated in the data-gathering and writing-up processes. These are warts-and-all accounts of the trials and tribulations of doing ethnography. They have become more prominent since the 1970s and reflect a growing emphasis on reflexivity in qualitative research in particular. Several of the sources referred to in this chapter include confessional tales (e.g. Armstrong 1993; Hobbs 1993; Giulianotti 1995). However, confessional tales are more concerned with detailing how research was carried out than with presenting findings. Very often the confessional tale is told in one context (such as an invited chapter in a book of similar tales), but the main findings are written up as realist tales.
3. *Impressionist tales*—accounts that place a heavy emphasis on ‘words, metaphors, phrasings, and . . . the expansive recall of fieldwork experience’ (Van Maanen 1988: 102). There is a heavy emphasis on stories of dramatic events that provide ‘a representational means of cracking open the culture and the fieldworker’s way of knowing it’ (Van Maanen 1988: 102).

Van Maanen (2011) has since revised his characterization of ethnographic writing, suggesting that increasingly confessional tales are routinely incorporated within standard ethnographies rather than largely appearing as distinct chapters or appendices. He also distinguishes:

1. *Structural tales*—accounts that link observation of the quotidian but then link this to wider ‘macro’ issues in society at large. Burawoy’s (1979) ethnography of a factory, which was heavily influenced by labour process theory, is an example. It was mentioned briefly in Chapter 2.

2. *Poststructural tales*—accounts that suggest that reality is a ‘fragile social construction subject to numerous lines of sight and interpretation’ (Van Maanen 2011: 248). This is done by peering behind the scenes of a manifest reality and suggesting that things are not quite what they seem. Van Maanen proposes that a good example of this type of tale is Fjellman’s (1992) deconstructive account of what lies behind many of the design features of Disney World in Florida in terms of the corporation’s manipulation of our perceptions and wallets.
3. *Advocacy tales*—accounts that are profoundly motivated by a sense that something is wrong and that the ethnographer wants to lay that bare for all to see. Gusterson’s (1996) ethnography of a nuclear weapons laboratory is a good example.

Adler and Adler (2008) have provided a categorization of genres of ethnographic writing that builds, at least in part, on an earlier version of Van Maanen (2010)’s categorization of types of ethnographic writing (Van Maanen 1988). They distinguish four genres:

1. *Classical ethnography*—realist tales that are accessible and aim to provide a persuasive account of a setting. The discussion of research methods often takes on the style of a confessional tale. The literature review is often used to show a gap in previous research on the topic area. Leidner’s (1993) study of a McDonald’s restaurant and Hodkinson’s (2002) study of goths (both in Figure 19.2) provide examples of this genre.
2. *Mainstream ethnography*—also realist tales, but oriented to a wider constituency of social scientists rather than just other qualitative researchers. It tends to be deductive in approach, and, although Adler and Adler do not put it this way, it has many of the trappings of a positivist style of representation. Mainstream ethnographies draw explicitly on an established literature and tend to be explicit about the research questions that drove the investigation. The research methods are laid out in a formal and specific manner. Zilber’s (2002) study of a rape crisis centre in Israel, with its explicit focus on contributing to institutional theory, provides a good example, as does Maitlis and Lawrence’s (2007) study of three British orchestras, which uses the literature on sensegiving in organizations as its *raison d’être*.
3. *Postmodern ethnography*—the ethnographer/writer is overtly insinuated into the writing and indeed often within the data and findings themselves.

Postmodern ethnographies often take the form of auto-ethnographies, in which the text is heavily personalized and the overall approach intensely reflexive. Adler and Adler give as an example of this form of ethnography an article by Ronai (1995) on childhood sexual abuse which is harrowing to read.

4. *Public ethnography*—in fact a form of ethnography that has existed for decades, the public ethnography is written with a general audience in mind. It is usually highly accessible, it is fairly light on the discussion of previous literature, and the presentation of the research methods is brief. Examples of this genre are Venkatesh's (2008) study of a Chicago gang (see Figure 19.2) and Búriková and Miller's (2010) study

of Slovak au pairs in London. Public ethnographies are more likely to be in book than article format.

It should also be appreciated that any ethnography may well contain elements of more than one category in these classifications. Thus, although Hodkinson's (2002) ethnography of goths has been classified above as a classical ethnography in Adler and Adler's scheme, it has elements of a postmodern ethnography in the way in which the author/researcher himself crops up in the text on a number of occasions. As such, these various ways of portraying modes of writing and representation in ethnography are best thought of as tendencies within ethnographies rather than as descriptions of them.



The changing nature of ethnography

Ethnography has been a research approach that has been very much in flux since the end of the twentieth century. The arrival of new forms or modes of ethnography such as visual ethnography and virtual/online ethnography (see Chapter 28) along with a growing interest in alternative forms of writing ethnography gives a sense of a vibrant and highly flexible approach. At the same time, there are concerns that are sometimes voiced that the term 'ethnography' is used loosely and that many so-called ethnographies are not obviously ethnographic in the traditional sense of involving a period of prolonged participant observation in a social setting (see Thinking deeply 19.4). There is a further suggestion that the traditional ethnography is in decline. Zickar and Carter (2010) have argued that workplace ethnographies, which have in the past been a rich vein of research (see Research in focus 13.4), have declined in use. One reason is possibly to do with the pressures on researchers nowadays. They write: 'The time commitment of traditional ethnographic research is intense and would require a reorganization of academic rewards and tenure policies given that ethnographic research often does not get published until 7 to 10 years after the original fieldwork began' (Zickar and Carter 2010: 312). This trend may be behind Emerson's (1987) suggestion that many ethnographers do not spend sufficient time in the field nowadays (see Thinking deeply 19.4). It implies that, if they do conduct ethnographic research at all, qualitative researchers are more likely to have relatively brief sojourns as fieldworkers

so that their work may be closer to the characteristics of what Wolcott (1990b) calls 'micro-ethnographies' (see Tips and skills 'Micro-ethnographies'). For inclusion in the Workplace Ethnography Project (see Research in focus 13.4), an ethnography had to have been conducted for at least six months' duration in the workplace concerned. It is interesting to contrast this requirement with DeSoucey's (2010) account of her ethnographic fieldwork. In terms of the classification in Figure 19.2, she was a Non-Participating Observer with Interaction. She writes in connection with her case study of the controversy surrounding *foie gras* and its production in France:

I collected primary data during four months of ethnographic fieldwork at 10 foie gras farms and 7 production facilities . . . a Parisian gourmet food exposition, local outdoor markets . . . tourist offices, foie gras museums, ships, restaurants, and a hotel management school. (DeSoucey 2010: 436)

Here we have an ethnographic study that over a four-month period collected data from nineteen organizations plus unspecified numbers of markets, tourist offices, museums, and restaurants, implying that it is unlikely that prolonged immersion in any setting took place.



Thinking deeply 19.4

When is a study ethnographic?

There is some debate about when it is and is not appropriate to refer to a qualitative investigation as an ethnography. In fact, one gets the impression that ethnography is almost a matter of degree. For writers like Emerson (1987) and Wolcott (1990b), a degree of immersion in the field is the touchstone of ethnography, with Emerson arguing that too often ethnographers do not spend enough time in the field. Indeed, my account of ethnography in Key concept 19.1 entails immersion in a social setting.

However, as I noted previously, ethnographers are rarely pure participant observers, in that they invariably conduct interviews or examine documents, thus raising the question of when it is appropriate to refer to a qualitative study as ethnographic. However, there may be circumstances when the requirement of immersion needs to be relaxed. A striking case in point is Gusterson's (1996: p. ix) 'ethnographic study of a nuclear weapons laboratory' in the USA. Because of the top-secret nature of work at this establishment and its sheer scale, participant observation in the conventional sense of prolonged immersion in the field was not possible. Gusterson (1996: 32) writes: 'I decided to mix formal interviews and the collection of documentary sources with a strategy of participant observation adapted to the demands and limitations of my own fieldwork situation. . . . I relied less on participant observation than most anthropologists in the field.' However, he did seek out as many employees as he could muster and he lived in the community in which the laboratory was located, participating in many of their core activities. Thus, while a study such as this may not exhibit the characteristics of a conventional ethnography of a workplace—because this option was not available to the researcher—Gusterson's determination to live among members of the community and to see the development of nuclear weapons through the eyes of those who worked there through interviews provides the investigation with many of the ingredients of an ethnography. What the study also suggests, along with the discussions of writers such as Emerson (1987) and Wolcott (1990b), is that whether a qualitative study is ethnographic is to a significant extent a matter of degree.

The constraints on modern qualitative researchers to which Zickar and Carter refer may also have produced a tendency for the term 'ethnographic' to have broadened to include studies that include little or no participant observation. Research methods like qualitative interviewing are flexible and are less disruptive of the work and personal lives of both researchers and research participants. Given both the growing diversity of forms/modes of ethnography and a tendency towards a stretching of the kind of investigation to which the term 'ethnography' refers (with prolonged participant observation no longer a *sine qua non*), it may be that the term is losing its original meaning.

One factor that may lie behind the apparently growing tendency towards ethnographies of shorter duration is that, as Van Maanen (2011) has observed, more and more such studies are 'multi-site' (Marcus 1998). This term can be employed in two connections. One is that the tendency towards global flows of people means that increasingly ethnographers have to follow their subjects across sites. An example is Scheper-Hughes's (2004) ethnography of the illegal traffic in organs (see Research in focus 18.2). We are given an

insight into the multi-sited nature of her research when she writes:

My basic ethnographic method—'follow the bodies!'—brought me to police morgues, hospital mortuaries, medical-legal institutes, intensive care units, emergency rooms, dialysis units, surgical units, operating rooms, as well as to police stations, jails and prisons, mental institutions, orphanages and court rooms in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. (Scheper-Hughes 2004: 32)

The other is that there has been a growing tendency towards multiple case study ethnographies of the kind discussed in Chapter 3. Several of the ethnographic studies that have been discussed in this chapter have been conducted in two or more locations (Leidner 1993; Fine 1996; Swain 2004; Gambetta and Hammill 2005; Maitlis and Lawrence 2007; DeSoucey 2010). The decision to study more than one site more or less inevitably means that the duration of the ethnographic research is shorter than in single-site research, given the career and personal constraints on ethnographers.



Key points

- Ethnography is a term that refers to both a method and the written product of research based on that method.
- The ethnographer is typically a participant observer who also uses non-observational methods and sources such as interviewing and documents.
- The ethnographer may adopt an overt or covert role, but the latter carries ethical difficulties.
- The method of access to a social setting will depend in part on whether it is a public or closed one.
- Key informants frequently play an important role for the ethnographer, but care is needed to ensure that their impact on the direction of research is not excessive.
- There are several different ways of classifying the kinds of role that the ethnographer may assume. These roles are not necessarily mutually exclusive.
- Field notes are important for prompting the ethnographer's memory and form much of the data for subsequent analysis.
- Feminist ethnography has become a popular approach to collecting data from a feminist standpoint, but there have been debates about whether there really can be a feminist ethnography.
- Visual materials such as photographs and video have attracted considerable interest among ethnographers in recent years, not just as adjuncts to data collection but as objects of interest in their own right.



Questions for review

- Is it possible to distinguish ethnography and participant observation?
- How does participant observation differ from structured observation?
- To what extent do participant observation and ethnography rely solely on observation?

Access

- 'Covert ethnography obviates the need to gain access to inaccessible settings and therefore has much to recommend it.' Discuss.
- Examine some articles in British sociology journals in which ethnography and participant observation figure strongly. Was the researcher in an overt or covert role? Was access needed to closed or open settings? How was access achieved?
- Is access to closed settings necessarily more difficult to achieve than to open settings?
- Does the problem of access finish once access to a chosen setting has been achieved?
- What might be the role of key informants in ethnographic research? Is there anything to be concerned about when using them?

Roles for ethnographers

- Why might it be useful to classify participant observer roles?
- What is meant by going native?
- Should ethnographers be active or passive in the settings in which they conduct research?

Field notes

- Why are field notes important for ethnographers?
- Why is it useful to distinguish between different types of field notes?

Bringing ethnographic research to an end

- How do you decide when to complete the data-collection phase in ethnographic research?

Can there be a feminist ethnography?

- What are the main ingredients of feminist ethnography?
- Assess Stacey's argument about whether feminist ethnography is possible in the light of Skeggs's research or any other ethnographic study that describes itself, or can be seen, as feminist.

The rise of visual ethnography

- What kinds of roles can visual materials play in ethnography?
- Do photographs provide unproblematic images of reality?

Writing ethnography

- How far is it true to say that ethnographic writing is typically imbued with realism?
- What forms of ethnographic writing other than realist tales can be found?

The changing nature of ethnography

- What factors lie behind some of the changing meanings of 'ethnography'?

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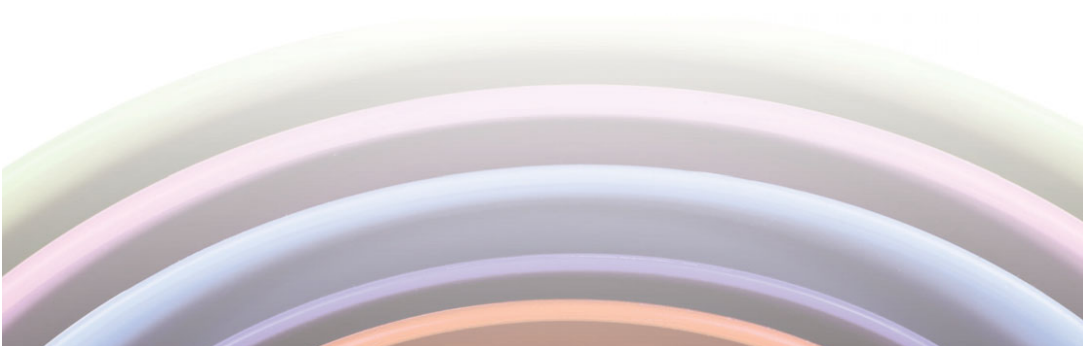
Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of ethnography and participant observation. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.

20

Interviewing in qualitative research

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Chapter guide

This chapter is concerned with the interview in qualitative research. The term ‘qualitative interview’ is often used to capture the different types of interview that are used in qualitative research, and this is the term that I will use as a shorthand way of categorizing the different forms of qualitative research interview. Such interviews tend to be far less structured than the kind of interview associated with survey research, which was discussed in Chapter 9 in terms of structured interviewing. This chapter is concerned with individual interviews in qualitative research; the focus group method, which is a form of interview but with several people, is discussed in the next chapter. The two forms of qualitative interviewing discussed in this chapter are unstructured and semi-structured interviewing. The chapter explores:

- the differences between structured interviewing and qualitative interviewing;
- the main characteristics of and differences between unstructured and semi-structured interviewing; this entails a recognition that the two terms refer to extremes and that in practice a wide range of interviews with differing degrees of structure lie between the extremes;
- how to devise and use an interview guide for semi-structured interviewing;
- the different kinds of question that can be asked in an interview guide;
- the importance of recording and transcribing qualitative interviews;
- life history and oral history interviewing;
- the significance of qualitative interviewing in feminist research;
- the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative interviewing relative to participant observation.

Introduction

The interview is probably the most widely employed method in qualitative research. Of course, as we have seen in Chapter 19, ethnography usually involves a substantial amount of interviewing, and this factor undoubtedly contributes to the widespread use of the interview by qualitative researchers. However, it is the flexibility of the interview that makes it so attractive. Since ethnography entails an extended period of participant observation, which is very disruptive for researchers because of the sustained absence(s) required from work and/or family life, research based more or less exclusively on interviews is a highly attractive alternative for the collection of qualitative data. Interviewing, the transcription of interviews, and the analysis of transcripts are all very time-consuming, but they can be more readily accommodated into researchers’ personal lives.

In Key concept 9.2, several different types of interview were briefly outlined. The bulk of the types outlined there—other than the structured interview and the standardized interview—are ones associated with qualitative research. *Focus groups* and *group interviewing* will be examined in the next chapter, and the remaining forms of interview associated with qualitative research will be explored at various points in this chapter. However, in spite of the apparent proliferation of terms describing types of interview in qualitative research, the two main types are the **unstructured interview** and the **semi-structured interview**. Researchers sometimes employ the term ‘qualitative interview’ to encapsulate these two types of interview. There is clearly the potential for considerable confusion here, but the types and definitions offered in Key concept 9.2 are meant to inject a degree of consistency of terminology.



Differences between the structured interview and the qualitative interview

Qualitative interviewing is usually very different from interviewing in quantitative research in a number of ways.

- The approach tends to be much less structured in qualitative research. In quantitative research, the approach is structured to maximize the reliability and validity of measurement of key concepts. It is also more structured because the researcher has a clearly specified set of research questions that are to be investigated. The structured interview is designed to answer these questions. Instead, in qualitative research, there is an emphasis on greater generality in the formulation of initial research ideas and on interviewees' own perspectives.
- In qualitative interviewing, there is much greater interest in the interviewee's point of view; in quantitative research, the interview reflects the researcher's concerns. This contrast is a direct outcome of the previous one.
- In qualitative interviewing, 'rambling' or going off at tangents is often encouraged—it gives insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important; in quantitative research, it is usually regarded as a nuisance and discouraged.
- In qualitative interviewing, interviewers can depart significantly from any schedule or guide that is being used. They can ask new questions that follow up interviewees' replies and can vary the order and even the wording of questions. In quantitative interviewing, none of these things should be done, because they will compromise the standardization of the interview process and hence the reliability and validity of measurement.
- As a result, qualitative interviewing tends to be flexible, responding to the direction in which interviewees take the interview and perhaps adjusting the emphases in the research as a result of significant issues that emerge in the course of interviews (see Research in focus 20.3 for an example). By contrast, quantitative interviews are typically inflexible, because of the need to standardize the way in which each interviewee is dealt with.
- In qualitative interviewing, the researcher wants rich, detailed answers; in structured interviewing, the interview is supposed to generate answers that can be **coded** and processed quickly.
- In qualitative interviewing, the interviewee may be interviewed on more than one and sometimes even several occasions (see Research in focus 20.1 for an example). In structured interviewing, unless the research is longitudinal in character, the person will be interviewed on one occasion only.



Research in focus 20.1 Unstructured interviewing

Malbon (1999: 33) describes his interviewing strategy for his research on 'clubbers' in the following way:

Clubbers were usually interviewed twice, with the second interview happening after we had been clubbing together. Both interviews were very much 'conversational' in style and I avoided interview schedules, although all interviews were taped. The first interview was designed to achieve three main goals: to put the clubber at ease while also explaining fully and clearly in what ways I was hoping for help; to begin to sketch in details of the clubbers' clubbing preferences, motivations and histories; and to allow me an opportunity to decide how to approach the night(s) out that I would be spending with the clubber . . . The second interview provided a forum for what was invariably a more relaxed meeting than the first interview . . . The main content of the second interview consisted of comments, discussion, and questions about the club visits we had made together, and the nature of the night out as an experience. In the latter half of these second interviews, discussion occasionally diversified in scope to cover wider aspects of the clubbers' lives: their relationships to work or study, their relationships with friends and loved ones, their hopes and fears for the future and their impressions of a social life beyond and after clubbing.



Student experience

The advantages of semi-structured interviewing

The relatively unstructured nature of the semi-structured interview and its capacity to provide insights into how research participants view the world was important to Hannah Creane. Hannah was attracted to it because she was concerned not to 'pigeon-hole' people while she was researching childhood.

The aim of my study was to explore the generational changes within childhood. I decided to interview nine people of several different generations about their childhood experiences, their opinions on the concept and construction of childhood, and their thoughts on childhood today. I chose to use semi-structured interviews because of the fact that they would allow me to gain the research I wanted without pigeon-holing the response of those I was interviewing.



To read more about Hannah's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/



Asking questions in the qualitative interview

However, qualitative interviewing varies a great deal in the approach taken by the interviewer. The two major types were mentioned at the beginning of the chapter.

1. The almost totally *unstructured interview*. Here the researcher uses at most an *aide-mémoire* as a brief set of prompts to him- or herself to deal with a certain range of topics. There may be just a single question that the interviewer asks, and the interviewee is then allowed to respond freely, with the interviewer simply responding to points that seem worthy of being followed up. Unstructured interviewing tends to be very similar in character to a conversation (Burgess 1984). See Research in focus 20.1 for an illustration of an unstructured interview style.
2. A *semi-structured interview*. The researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an *interview guide*, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply. Questions may not follow on exactly in the way outlined on the schedule. Questions that are not included in the guide may be asked as the interviewer picks up on things said by interviewees. But, by and large, all the questions will be asked and a similar wording will be used from interviewee to interviewee. Research in focus 20.2 and 20.3 provide examples of these features.

In both cases, the interview process is *flexible*. Also, the emphasis must be on how the interviewee frames and

understands issues and events—that is, what the interviewee views as important in explaining and understanding events, patterns, and forms of behaviour. Thus, Leidner (1993: 238) describes the interviewing she carried out in a McDonald's restaurant as involving a degree of structure, but adds that the interviews also 'allowed room to pursue topics of particular interest to the workers'. Once again, we must remember that qualitative research is *not* quantitative research with the numbers missing. There is a growing tendency for semi-structured and unstructured interviewing to be referred to collectively as *in-depth interviews* or as *qualitative interviews*. The kinds of interviewing carried out in qualitative research are typical also of *life history interviewing* and *oral history interviewing*, which are examined in a section below.

The two different types of interview in qualitative research are extremes, and there is quite a lot of variability between them (the example in Research in focus 20.2 seems somewhat more structured than that in Research in focus 20.3, for example, though both are illustrative of semi-structured interviewing), but most qualitative interviews are close to one type or the other. In neither case does the interviewer slavishly follow a schedule, as is done in quantitative research interviewing; but in semi-structured interviews the interviewer does follow a script to a certain extent. The choice of whether to veer towards one type rather than the other is likely to be affected by a variety of factors.



Research in focus 20.2

Semi-structured interviewing

Lupton (1996) was interested in investigating people's food preferences, and to this end her research entailed thirty-three semi-structured interviews conducted by four female interviewers (of whom she was one) living in Sydney in 1994. She writes:

Interviewees were asked to talk about their favourite and most detested foods; whether they thought there was such a thing as 'masculine' or 'feminine' foods or dishes; which types of foods they considered 'healthy' or 'good for you' and which not; which types of foods they ate to lose weight and which they avoided for the same reason; memories they recalled about food and eating events from childhood and adulthood; whether they liked to try new foods; which foods they had tasted first as an adult; whether there had been any changes in the types of food they had eaten over their lifetime; whether they associated different types of food with particular times, places or people; whether they ever had any arguments about food with others; whether they themselves cooked and if they enjoyed it; whether they ate certain foods when in certain moods and whether they had any rituals around food. (Lupton 1996: 156, 158)



Research in focus 20.3

Flexibility in semi-structured interviewing

Like Lupton (1996; Research in focus 20.2), Beardsworth and Keil (1992) were interested in food-related issues, and in particular in vegetarianism. They carried out seventy-three 'relatively unstructured interviews' in the East Midlands. They write that the interviews were

guided by an inventory of issues which were to be covered in each session. As the interview programme progressed, interviewees themselves raised additional or complementary issues, and these form an integral part of the study's findings. In other words, the interview programme was not based upon a set of relatively rigid pre-determined questions and prompts. Rather, the open-ended, discursive nature of the interviews permitted an iterative process of refinement, whereby lines of thought identified by earlier interviewees could be taken up and presented to later interviewees. (Beardsworth and Keil 1992: 261–2)

- Researchers who are concerned that the use of even the most rudimentary interview guide will not allow genuine access to the world views of members of a social setting or of people sharing common attributes are likely to favour an unstructured interview.
- If the researcher is beginning the investigation with a fairly clear focus, rather than a very general notion of wanting to do research on a topic, it is likely that the interviews will be semi-structured ones, so that the more specific issues can be addressed.
- If more than one person is to carry out the fieldwork, in order to ensure a modicum of comparability of interviewing style, it is likely that semi-structured interviewing will be preferred. See Research in focus 20.2 and 20.3 for examples.
- If you are doing multiple case study research, you are likely to find that you will need some structure in order to ensure cross-case comparability. Certainly, all my qualitative research on different kinds of organization has entailed semi-structured interviewing, and it is not a coincidence that this is because most of it has been multiple case study research (e.g. Bryman et al. 1994; see Research in focus 17.6; Bryman, Gillingwater, and McGuinness 1996).

Preparing an interview guide

The idea of an interview guide is much less specific than the notion of a structured interview schedule. In fact, the term can be employed to refer to the brief list of memory

prompts of areas to be covered that is often employed in unstructured interviewing or to the somewhat more structured list of issues to be addressed or questions to be asked in semi-structured interviewing. What is crucial is that the questioning allows interviewers to glean the ways in which research participants view their social world and that there is flexibility in the conduct of the interviews. The latter is as much if not more to do with the conduct of the interview than with the nature of the interview guide as such.

In preparing for qualitative interviews, Lofland and Lofland (1995: 78) suggest asking yourself the question 'Just what about this thing is puzzling me?' This can be applied to each of the research questions you have generated or it may be a mechanism for generating some research questions. They suggest that your puzzlement can be stimulated by various activities: random thoughts in different contexts, which are then written down as quickly as possible; discussions with colleagues, friends, and relatives; and, of course, the existing literature on the topic. The formulation of the research question(s) should not be so specific that alternative avenues of enquiry that might arise during the collection of field-work data are closed off. Such premature closure of your research focus would be inconsistent with the process of qualitative research (Figure 17.1), with the emphasis on the world view of the people you will be interviewing, and with the approaches to qualitative data analysis like **grounded theory** that emphasize the importance of not starting out with too many preconceptions (see Chapter 24). Gradually, an order and structure will begin to emerge in your meanderings around your research question(s) and will form the basis for your interview guide.

You should also consider 'What do I need to know in order to answer each of the research questions I'm interested in?' This means trying to get an appreciation of what the interviewee sees as significant and important in relation to each of your topic areas. Thus, your questioning must cover the areas that you need but from the perspective of your interviewees. This means that, even though qualitative research is predominantly unstructured, it is rarely so unstructured that the researcher cannot at least specify a research focus.

Some basic elements in the preparation of your interview guide will be:

- create a certain amount of order on the topic areas, so that your questions about them flow reasonably well, but be prepared to alter the order of questions during the actual interview;
- formulate interview questions or topics in a way that will help you to answer your research questions (but try not to make them too specific);
- try to use a language that is comprehensible and relevant to the people you are interviewing;
- just as in interviewing in quantitative research, do not ask leading questions;
- remember to ensure that you ask or record 'facesheet' information of a general kind (name, age, gender, etc.) and a specific kind (position in company, number of years employed, number of years involved in a group, etc.), because such information is useful for contextualizing people's answers.

There are some practical details to attend to before the interview.

- Make sure you are familiar with the setting in which the interviewee works or lives. This will help you to understand what he or she is saying in the interviewee's own terms.
- Get hold of a good-quality recording machine and microphone. Qualitative researchers nearly always record and then transcribe their interviews (see the section on 'Recording and transcription' below). A good microphone is highly desirable, because many interviews are let down by poor recording. Also, make sure you are thoroughly familiar with the operation of the equipment you use before beginning your interviews.
- Make sure as far as possible that the interview takes place in a setting that is quiet (so there is no or little outside noise that might affect the quality of the recording) and private (so the interviewee does not have to worry about being overheard).
- Prepare yourself for the interview by cultivating as many of the criteria of a quality interviewer suggested by Kvale (1996) as possible (see Tips and skills 'Criteria of a successful interviewer'). What underpins a lot of the desirable qualities of the qualitative interviewer specified by Kvale is that he or she must be a good *listener*, which entails being active and alert in the interview. An inability to listen may mean failing to pick up on a really important point or asking an irritatingly pointless question later in the interview. The list of qualities is also underpinned by a need for the interviewer to be *flexible* when appropriate (see also the section on 'Flexibility in the interview' below). I would also add that it is important to be *non-judgmental* as far as possible. Try not to indicate agreement or

disagreement with the interviewee. He or she may even try to get you to respond to his or her views. Be careful about doing this, as it may distort later answers.

- Interviewing is very demanding, and students who are new to the method sometimes understate the personal issues involved. It is worth conducting some

pilot interviews, not just to test how well the interview flows but in order to gain some experience. As Tips and skills 'Interviewing for the first time' shows, it is better to be prepared for some of the unexpected contingencies that can arise in the course of an interview.



Student experience

On not leading interviewees

As noted in the list of bullet points concerning the preparation of an interview guide, it is important not to lead interviewees. Gareth Matthews describes how he was concerned not to lead the employers and managers in firms in the hospitality industry to focus on migrant workers. He wanted any discussion of migrant workers to come naturally from them. Here is how he went about it.

Also, I wanted to explore the nature of employers' recruitment decisions in terms of their perceptions of skill/attributes/attitudes that exist in the external labour market in both British workers and migrant workers, though without making it overly obvious that this was a primary line of enquiry. Therefore, while I did not want to mask the research aims from interviewees, I also did not want to alert them to focus on migrants, as I felt that this would prejudice their responses (I found that, in the first few interviews, employers were generally quite suspicious and, accordingly, quite defensive when speaking about these matters).

Therefore, I found it easier to focus on the notion of 'skill shortages' in the hospitality industry, by referring to the published information that points to a crisis in the sector with regards to finding workers with the appropriate attributes. This tended to [elicit] a detailed response on the nature of skills and the perceptions of British workers with regards to these skills. It was then easier to turn the discussion towards a focus on employers' recruitment of migrant workers and their perceptions of the attributes embodied in these workers vis-à-vis British workers. Also, this discussion made it possible to explore employers' perceptions of particular groups of migrant workers, and led to some very interesting (though worrying) findings with regards to employers' use of race and nationality as distinctive categories when making recruitment decisions.



To read more about Gareth's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/



Tips and skills

Interviewing for the first time

The prospect of doing your first interview can be daunting. Also, it is easy to make some fundamental mistakes when you begin interviewing. An American study of postgraduates' experiences of a lengthy interview training course showed that novice interviewers were easily thrown out by a number of events or experiences in the course of the interview (Roulston et al. 2003). Their findings suggest five challenges that are worth bearing in mind when approaching your first interview(s).

1. *Unexpected interviewee behaviour or environmental problems.* These inexperienced interviewers were easily discomforted by responses or behaviour on the part of interviewees or by problems like noise in the vicinity of the interview. When you go into the interview, bear in mind that things may not go according to plan.

Interviewees sometimes say things that are very surprising and some like to startle or even shock interviewers. Equally, there can be many distractions close to where the interview takes place. You clearly cannot plan for or have control over these things, but you can bear in mind that they might happen and try to limit their impact on you and on the course of the interview.

2. *Intrusion of own biases and expectations.* Roulston et al. report that some of the trainees were surprised when they read their transcripts how their own biases and expectations were evident in the ways they asked questions and followed up on replies.
3. *Maintaining focus in asking questions.* Students reported that they sometimes had difficulty probing answers, asking follow-up questions, and clarifying questions in a way that did not lose sight of the research topic and what the questions were getting at.
4. *Dealing with sensitive issues.* Some students asked questions that caused interviewees to become upset, and this response could have an adverse impact on the course of the interview. However, most students felt that they coped reasonably well with such emotionally charged situations.
5. *Transcription.* Many reported finding transcription difficult and time-consuming—more so than they had imagined.

There are, of course, many other possible issues that impinge on first-time interviewers. Many do not go away either, no matter how experienced you are. It is very difficult to know how to deal with some of these contingencies. However, it is worth bearing in mind that they arise and that their impact may be greatest when you begin interviewing.



Tips and skills

Criteria of a successful interviewer

Kvale (1996) has proposed a very useful list of ten criteria of a successful interviewer.

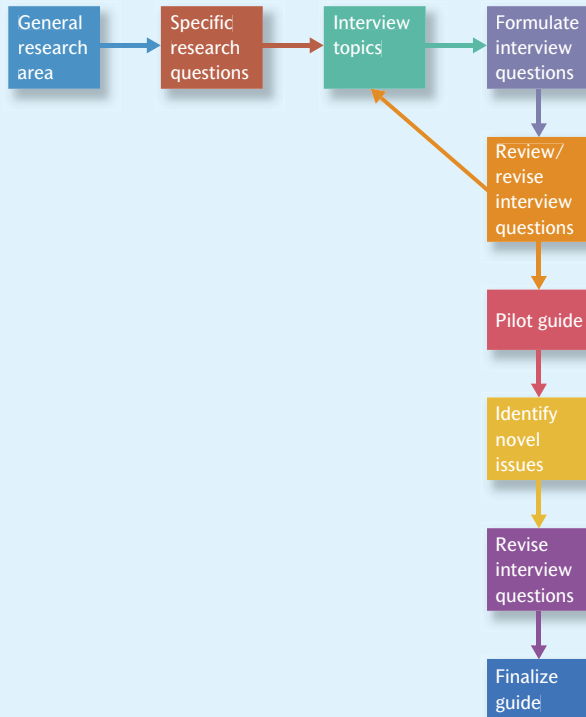
- *Knowledgeable:* is thoroughly familiar with the focus of the interview; pilot interviews of the kind used in survey interviewing can be useful here.
- *Structuring:* gives purpose for interview; rounds it off; asks whether interviewee has questions.
- *Clear:* asks simple, easy, short questions; no jargon.
- *Gentle:* lets people finish; gives them time to think; tolerates pauses.
- *Sensitive:* listens attentively to what is said and how it is said; is empathetic in dealing with the interviewee.
- *Open:* responds to what is important to interviewee and is flexible.
- *Steering:* knows what he or she wants to find out.
- *Critical:* is prepared to challenge what is said—for example, dealing with inconsistencies in interviewees' replies.
- *Remembering:* relates what is said to what has previously been said.
- *Interpreting:* clarifies and extends meanings of interviewees' statements, but without imposing meaning on them.

To Kvale's list I would add the following.

- *Balanced:* does not talk too much, which may make the interviewee passive, and does not talk too little, which may result in the interviewee feeling he or she is not talking along the right lines.
- *Ethically sensitive:* is sensitive to the ethical dimension of interviewing, ensuring the interviewee appreciates what the research is about, its purposes, and that his or her answers will be treated confidentially.

Figure 20.1

Formulating questions for an interview guide



After the interview, make notes about:

- how the interview went (was interviewee talkative, cooperative, nervous, well-dressed/scruffy, etc.?);
- where the interview took place;
- any other feelings about the interview (did it open up new avenues of interest?);
- the setting (busy/quiet, many/few other people in the vicinity, new/old buildings, use of computers).

These various guidelines suggest the series of steps in formulating questions for an interview guide in qualitative research presented in Figure 20.1.

Kinds of questions

The kinds of questions asked in qualitative interviews are highly variable. Kvale (1996) has suggested nine different kinds of question. Most interviews will contain virtually all of them, although interviews that rely on lists of topics are likely to follow a somewhat looser format. Kvale's nine types of question are as follows.

1. *Introducing questions*: 'Please tell me about when your interest in X first began?'; 'Have you ever . . . ?'; 'Why did you go to . . . ?'.
2. *Follow-up questions*: getting the interviewee to elaborate his or her answer, such as 'What do you mean by



Tips and skills

Interviewees and distance

Sometimes you may need to contact interviewees who are a long way from you—perhaps even abroad. While interviewing in qualitative research is usually of the face-to-face kind, time and money restrictions may mean that you will need to interview such people in a less personal context. There are two possibilities. One is telephone interviewing. The cost of a telephone interview is much less than the cost involved in travelling long distances and can be particularly cheap if conducted via Skype. Also, the iPhone app called Viber allows two people who have the app installed and who are linked to Wi-Fi at the time to talk free of charge. Telephone interviewing in qualitative research is discussed in a separate section below. Another possibility is the online interview, in which the interview is conducted by email. This method is described in Chapter 28.



Research in focus 20.4

Using a semi-structured interview

It can be difficult in qualitative interviews to get people to expand further on their answers. The following sequence between the interviewer (Int) and interviewee (R), which is from the study of early retirees by Jones et al. (2010) that was referred to on several occasions in Chapter 1, is interesting in this regard:

Int Yes, would you ever consider going back to work?

R Not at the moment, well I suppose it depended what was on offer, the big problem is, I did actually consider, or I considered and was considered for a directorship at Lloyds Insurance Company, so I went down and spoke to them, and I said to Diane [wife] before I went, it's like two days every month, you know you get paid thirty thousand a year, which is very nice, but it's two days every month and you've got to be there, which means if we went away for five weeks, we're sort of knackered and you've got to build all your holidays around it, so anyway went for the interview, I didn't get it but on the other hand I wasn't that enthusiastic about it.

Int No.

R But if I could actually do something I don't know, fundraising or something like that, and got paid for it, I wouldn't mind doing that, on my own terms and when it suits me, but I don't think I'd want to go back full time or consultancy. (Jones et al. 2010: 111)

The striking feature of this exchange is the way in which the interviewer's simple interjection—'No'—draws out a further set of reflections that qualify somewhat the interviewee's previous remark. As such it acts as what Kvale calls a follow-up question. In the following exchange, there is an interesting use of a probing question:

R I'd like to find out what we want to do. I think the hardest thing we've got is both of us don't know what we want.

Int Uh huh. But I mean, you have been retired for ten years, haven't you?

R Ten years, yeah but we still don't know what we want to do. We're drifting, I suppose—nicely, no problems on that, but we haven't got anything . . . we keep on saying, we've got the money, what do we want to spend it on? We don't know. It's always been that we don't know what we want to do; we don't know whether we want to buy a house. We do look at them and say we don't want another house. We don't really want another car—can't be bothered about that. I should give my car away! And things like that, so . . . no, we don't know what we want to do. (Jones et al. 2010: 113)

The interviewer is clearly paying close attention to what is being said because he or she picks up on the respondent's claimed lack of post-retirement direction and as a result seeks clarification of the interviewee's reply. There is a risk that the interviewer could be viewed as being judgmental ('how on earth can you not have

decided what you want to be doing with your retirement after ten years?') but the comment is handled skilfully and, as it happens, productively in that the interviewee expands significantly on the earlier answer. The following exchange is taken from an interview with an inhabitant of Chorlton in Greater Manchester for the study of globalization and a sense of place by Savage et al. (2005) that was referred to in Chapter 18:

In what ways do you think the area is changing?

I think it is becoming more trendy. Round the corner we have two wine bars that have opened in the last few years, two expensive clothes shops, very good for young people and just various things. Lots of restaurants.

Do you think it is good or bad?

Yes, I like it, it reminds me of London and places I've lived in. In a way I would quite like to be living in London, I can't afford that, but that type of feel about it, I would like it to be a bit more cosmopolitan.

If you move, where would you like to move to?

Well my ideal sort of place would be somewhere by the sea that is fairly town-like, somewhere like Brighton, sort of London with the sea, or somewhere where the architecture is really nice, Cambridge or Oxford.

(Savage et al. 2005: 96)

It provides a useful example of the use of what Kvale calls 'specifying questions', particularly in the second and third questions, which encourage the interviewee to amplify his or her original response with some more specific detail.

that?'; even 'Yeeees?' See Research in focus 20.4 for an example when the interviewer's simple interjection—No—invites further information. Kvale suggests that repeating significant words in an answer can stimulate further explanation.

3. *Probing questions*: following up what has been said through direct questioning, such as 'Could you say some more about that?'; 'You said earlier that you prefer not to X. Could you say what kinds of things have put you off X?'; 'In what ways do you find X disturbing?' In Research in focus 20.4 in the second interview sequence from the research by Jones et al. (2010) the interviewer asks 'Uh huh. But I mean, you have been retired for ten years, haven't you?' In effect, the interviewer is trying to get the interviewee to explain how he could have been retired for ten years and yet still not know what his plans were.
4. *Specifying questions*: 'What did you do then?'; 'How did X react to what you said?'; 'What effect did X have on you?' See Research in focus 20.4 for an example from the Savage et al. (2005) study—if you move, where would you like to move to?
5. *Direct questions*: 'Do you find it easy to keep smiling when serving customers?'; 'Are you happy with the way you and your husband decide how money should be spent?' Such questions are perhaps best left until towards the end of the interview, in order not to influence the direction of the interview too much. The question 'would you ever consider going back to work?' in Research in focus 20.4 is an example.

6. *Indirect questions*: 'What do most people round here think of the ways that management treats its staff?', perhaps followed up by 'Is that the way you feel too?', in order to get at the individual's own view.

7. *Structuring questions*: 'I would now like to move on to a different topic.'

8. *Silence*: allow pauses to signal that you want to give the interviewee the opportunity to reflect and amplify an answer.

9. *Interpreting questions*: 'Do you mean that your leadership role has had to change from one of encouraging others to a more directive one?'; 'Is it fair to say that what you are suggesting is that you don't mind being friendly towards customers most of the time, but when they are unpleasant or demanding you find it more difficult?' For the research referred to in Research in focus 20.8, the interviewer 'sought to verify her interpretations during the course of each interview by offering tentative summaries and inviting participants to challenge or confirm her understanding' (Bosley et al. 2009: 1499).

As this list suggests, one of the main ingredients of the interview is listening—being very attentive to what the interviewee is saying or even not saying. It means that the interviewer is active without being too intrusive—a difficult balance. But it also means that, just because the interview is being recorded (the generally recommended practice whenever it is feasible), the interviewer cannot take things easy. In fact, an interviewer must be very

attuned and responsive to what the interviewee is saying and doing. This is also important because something like body language may indicate that the interviewee is becoming uneasy or anxious about a line of questioning. An ethically sensitive interviewer will not want to place undue pressure on the person he or she is talking to and will need to be prepared to cut short that line of questioning if it is clearly a source of concern.

It is also likely that the kinds of questions asked will vary in terms of the different stages of a qualitative interview. Charmaz (2002) distinguishes three types of questions in this connection. She was in fact writing in the context of interviewing for a project guided by grounded theory (see Chapter 24), but her suggestions have a more general applicability. She distinguishes:

- *Initial open-ended questions*: Examples are: 'What events led to . . .?'; 'What was your life like prior to . . .?'; 'Is this organization typical of others you have worked in?'
- *Intermediate questions*: 'How did you feel about . . . when you first learned about it?'; 'What immediate impacts did . . . have on your life?'; 'What do you like most/least about working in this organization?'
- *Ending questions*: 'How have your views about . . . changed?'; 'What advice would you give now to someone who finds that he or she must get experience . . .?'; 'If you had your time again, would you choose to work for this organization?'

Most questions are likely to be of the intermediate kind in any interview guide, and in practice there is likely to be overlap between the three kinds. None the less, this is a useful distinction to bear in mind.

Remember as well that in interviews you are going to ask about different kinds of things, such as:

- values—of interviewee, of group, of organization;
- beliefs—of interviewee, of others, of group;
- behaviour—of interviewee, of others;
- formal and informal roles—of interviewee, of others;
- relationships—of interviewee, of others;
- places and locales;
- emotions—particularly of the interviewee, but also possibly of others;
- encounters;
- stories.

Try to vary the questioning in terms of types of question (as suggested by Kvale's nine types, which were outlined above) and the types of phenomena you ask about. One

final bit of advice when formulating questions for qualitative interviewing is that it is worth bearing in mind some of the principles for asking questions in surveys, as outlined in Chapter 11. Some of the principles outlined there apply equally well to qualitative interviewing, in particular, avoiding questions that: are too complex; are double-barrelled; are leading; and use difficult or unfamiliar terms.

Vignette questions in qualitative interviews

It is also worth bearing in mind that, although there may be times when you want to ask fairly general questions, these are frequently best avoided. Mason (2002) counsels against the use of such questions, arguing that, when they are used, interviewees usually ask the interviewer to clarify what is meant by or to contextualize the question. Vignette questions may be used in qualitative interviewing as well as in structured interviewing (see Chapter 9) and represent one way of asking specific questions. In qualitative research, vignette questions can be employed to help to ground interviewees' views and accounts of behaviour in particular situations (Barter and Renold 1999). By presenting interviews with concrete and realistic scenarios, the researcher can elicit a sense of how certain contexts mould behaviour. R. Hughes (1998) employed the technique in a study of perceptions among drug injectors of HIV risk. This is a field of research in which context has been shown to be important, because injectors' willingness to engage in risky behaviour is influenced by situational factors. A scenario was produced that presented risk behaviour scenarios that two hypothetical drug injectors have to address. The vignette helped to reveal the kinds of behaviour interviewees felt that injectors *should* engage in (such as protected sex) and how they felt the hypothetical injectors *would* behave (such as unprotected sex in particular situations). Hughes argues that such an approach is particularly valuable with sensitive topics of this kind and for eliciting a range of responses to different contexts. Jenkins et al. (2010) also employed the vignette technique with drug-users but with a much larger sample of seventy-eight, of whom fifty-nine were re-interviewed twelve weeks later. This longitudinal element allowed changes in orientation to drugs over time to be charted. In fact, just over one-third of those interviewed a second time showed a marked change of perspective.

Photographs in qualitative interviews

A further way in which questioning in qualitative interviews may be grounded is through the use of photographs. The use of photographs in interviews was explored in the

context of visual ethnography in Chapter 19 but is briefly covered here to present some further thoughts in the specific context of interviewing. The use of photographs in this way is often referred to as *photo-elicitation*, which has been defined as 'the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview' (Harper 2002: 13). Photographs that are part of the interviewee's collection (see Research in focus 20.5 for an example) or ones that he or she has taken for the purpose of the research may be used as a stimulus for questioning. Yet another use can be discerned in the 'Masculinities, identities and risk: transition in the lives of men as fathers' study that is part of the Timescapes programme of research (see Research in focus 3.12). In addition to using some of the fathers' own photographs, Henwood, Shirani and Finn (2011) presented fathers who joined the research in 2008 with historical photographs depicting fatherhood and masculinity. Five images were used, going from Victorian times through the 1950s to the present day. Interviewees were asked to discuss their reactions to the photographs and to consider what was being represented and how it relates to them. One of the fathers talks about how he can relate much more to one of the more recent images:

Marcus That's more where I see myself being.
I So you think we've moved, changed, the representation's got more what?
Marcus I think maybe it's got more tactile and more emotional and less functional. (Henwood et al. 2011: 337)

In this way, the researchers are able to use these historical photographs as an anchor to address perceptions of fatherhood and masculine identity.

Harper argues that using photographs (or indeed other visual media) in interviews may serve several useful roles:

- Images may help to ground the researcher's interview questions. The kinds of things in which social researchers are interested are often quite difficult for others to relate to. Using a photograph may help to provide both parties to the interview with a meaningful context for their discussion.
- Stimulating interviewees to engage visually with familiar settings and objects may help them to think about things that they take for granted in different ways.
- The use of photographs may stimulate the interviewee to remember people or events or situations that might otherwise have been forgotten.

However, Harper also reminds us that using photographs in qualitative interviews does not necessarily result in superior interviews. He cites the case of a study he conducted of farmers in the USA. The research sought to understand farmers' perspectives on a host of issues such as how they defined the land and the animals they nurtured and their views of such things as changes in farming technology. However, Harper writes that the photographs he took 'did not evoke deep reflections on the issues I was interested in' and 'did not break the frame of farmers' normal views' (Harper 2002: 20; emphasis in



Research in focus 20.5

A photo-elicitation study of inter-racial families

Twine (2006) discusses her use in several different countries of photo-elicitation interviews designed to explore racial consciousness in inter-racial families. In one study, she used family photographs to explore with 'white mothers of African-descent children' issues of cultural identity and the practices through which identity is generated, and how racial identities shift over time. The photographs were explored in terms of what was important about them to the interviewee. What the photographs in tandem with the interviews allowed her to reveal is that the images of apparent familial and racial harmony occluded an underlying opposition to the inter-racial partnership that was created. This opposition was found on both sides of the family. However, the use of both the photographs and the interview generated a balanced account in which the discord was tempered by considerable harmony. Referring to the particular photo-elicitation interview that is the focus of her article, Twine (2006: 507) writes: 'photo-interview combined with my analysis of the photographs brought into sharp relief the emphasis that I had placed on conflicts, tensions and racial troubles while not considering the degree of social cohesion that existed.' Twine argues that the photographs provided an opportunity and pretext for the interviewees to reflect on the struggles of the past in relation to the present and to reframe their understanding of the significance of the photographs. What emerges is a balanced account of harmony and disharmony and of change in relationships in connection with the life course.

original). He suggests that the photographs may have been too familiar in appearance to farmers, in that they possibly resembled images that regularly appear in farming magazines. Harper found that, when he subsequently took aerial photographs and used historical ones, farmers were more reflective in their interviews. This experience from one of the leading exponents of the use of visual research methods reminds us that there is no way of guaranteeing interesting data in qualitative investigations and suggests that a preparedness to experiment when things do not go quite according to plan can pay dividends.

Using an interview guide: an example

Research in focus 20.6 is taken from an interview for a study of visitors to Disney theme parks (Bryman 1999). The study was briefly mentioned in Chapter 8 as an example of a snowball sampling procedure. The interviews were concerned to elicit visitors' interpretations of the

parks that had been visited. The interview is with a man who was in his sixties and his wife who was two years younger. They had visited Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, and were very enthusiastic about their visit.

The sequence begins with the interviewer asking what would be considered a 'direct question' in terms of the list of nine question types suggested by Kvale (1996) and outlined above. The replies are very bland and do little more than reflect the interviewees' positive feelings about their visit to Disney World. The wife acknowledges this when she says 'but I need to say more than that, don't I?' Interviewees frequently know that they are expected to be expansive in their answers. This sequence occurred around halfway through the interview, so the interviewees were primed by then into realizing that more details were expected. There is almost a tinge of embarrassment that the answer has been so brief and not very illuminating. The husband's answer is more expansive but not particularly enlightening.



Research in focus 20.6

Part of the transcript of a semi-structured interview

- Interviewer* OK. What were your views or feelings about the presentation of different cultures, as shown in, for example, Jungle Cruise or It's a Small World at the Magic Kingdom or in World Showcase at Epcot?
- Wife* Well, I thought the different countries at Epcot were wonderful, but I need to say more than that, don't I?
- Husband* They were very good and some were better than others, but that was down to the host countries themselves really, as I suppose each of the countries represented would have been responsible for their own part, so that's nothing to do with Disney, I wouldn't have thought. I mean some of the landmarks were hard to recognize for what they were supposed to be, but some were very well done. Britain was OK, but there was only a pub and a Welsh shop there really, whereas some of the other pavilions, as I think they were called, were good ambassadors for the countries they represented. China, for example, had an excellent 360 degree film showing parts of China and I found that very interesting.
- Interviewer* Did you think there was anything lacking about the content?
- Husband* Well I did notice that there weren't many black people at World Showcase, particularly the American Adventure. Now whether we were there on an unusual day in that respect I don't know, but we saw plenty of black Americans in the Magic Kingdom and other places, but very few if any in that World Showcase. And there was certainly little mention of black history in the American Adventure presentation, so maybe they felt alienated by that, I don't know, but they were noticeable by their absence.
- Interviewer* So did you think there were any special emphases?
- Husband* Well thinking about it now, because I hadn't really given this any consideration before you started asking about it, but thinking about it now, it was only really representative of the developed world, you know, Britain, America, Japan, world leaders many of them in technology, and there was nothing of the Third World there. Maybe that's their own fault, maybe they were asked to participate and didn't, but now that I think about it, that does come to me. What do you think, love?
- Wife* Well, like you, I hadn't thought of it like that before, but I agree with you.

There then follows the first of two important prompts by the interviewer. The husband's response is more interesting in that he now begins to answer in terms of the possibility that black people were under-represented in attractions like the American Adventure, which tells the story of America through tableaux and films via a debate between two audio-animatronic figures—Mark Twain and Benjamin Franklin. The second prompt yields further useful reflection, this time carrying the implication that Third World countries are under-represented in World Showcase in the Epcot Centre. The couple are clearly aware that it is the prompting that has made them provide these reflections when they say: 'Well thinking about it now, because I hadn't really given this any consideration before you started asking about it' and 'Well, like you, I hadn't thought of it like that before'. This is the whole point of prompting—to get the interviewee to think more about the topic and to provide the opportunity for a more detailed response. It is not a leading question, since the interviewees were not being asked 'Do you think that the Disney company fails to recognize the significance of black history (or ignores

the Third World) in its presentation of different cultures?' There is no doubt that it is the prompts that elicit the more interesting replies, but that is precisely their role.

Recording and transcription

The point has already been made on several occasions that, in qualitative research, the interview is usually audio-recorded and transcribed whenever possible (see Tips and skills 'Why you should record and transcribe interviews'). Qualitative researchers are frequently interested not just in *what* people say but also in the *way* that they say it. If this aspect is to be fully woven into an analysis, it is necessary for a complete account of the series of exchanges in an interview to be available. Also, because the interviewer is supposed to be highly alert to what is being said—following up interesting points made, prompting and probing where necessary, drawing attention to any inconsistencies in the interviewee's answers—it is best if he or she is not distracted by having to concentrate on getting down notes on what is said.



Tips and skills

Why you should record and transcribe interviews

With approaches that entail detailed attention to language, such as conversation analysis and discourse analysis (see Chapter 22), the recording of conversations and interviews is to all intents and purposes mandatory. However, researchers who use qualitative interviews and focus groups (see Chapter 21) also tend to record and then transcribe interviews. Heritage (1984: 238) suggests that the procedure of recording and transcribing interviews has the following advantages.

- It helps to correct the natural limitations of our memories and of the intuitive glosses that we might place on what people say in interviews.
- It allows more thorough examination of what people say.
- It permits repeated examinations of the interviewees' answers.
- It opens up the data to public scrutiny by other researchers, who can evaluate the analysis that is carried out by the original researchers of the data (that is, a **secondary analysis**).
- It therefore helps to counter accusations that an analysis might have been influenced by a researcher's values or biases.
- It allows the data to be reused in other ways from those intended by the original researcher—for example, in the light of new theoretical ideas or analytic strategies.

However, it has to be recognized that the procedure is very time-consuming. It also requires good equipment, usually in the form of a good-quality recording device and microphone but also, if possible, a transcription machine. Transcription also very quickly results in a daunting pile of paper. Also, recording equipment may be offputting for interviewees.



Tips and skills

Audio-recording interviews digitally

For years, the cassette tape recorder was the accepted medium for recording interviews and focus group sessions. In recent years, more and more researchers are using digital audio-recording devices, which can be played back on a computer with the appropriate software or on an MP3 player like an iPod. The chief advantage of a digital recording is that the recording is far superior, not least because the familiar 'hiss' that can usually be heard when playing back cassette tapes is eliminated. It is also possible to enhance the recordings so that background noise is filtered out. As a result of the superior sound quality, it is easier to transcribe interviews and also mistakes due to mishearing are less likely. Digital recordings can easily be backed up and can be played back again and again to listen to a portion that may be unclear without increasing any risk to the recording (doing this with tapes increases the chance of them snapping or of affecting the quality of the recording).

One further advantage, although one that may lie more in the future than in the present, is that it may be possible to use voice-recognition (voice-to-text) software to transcribe the interviews. This represents a massive saving on time. The problem is that, although such software is improving all the time, interviews are not an ideal medium for such software. This is because the software needs to be 'trained' to recognize a voice. However, an interview comprises at least two voices and a project will comprise several, and very often many, interviewees, which will make the process of 'training' very difficult. One solution is to back up the digital recording onto tape. This may seem a pointless thing to do, but it will result in a much crisper recording than if the interview had been recorded directly onto tape, and it is then possible to use a conventional transcribing machine. Transcribing machines replay a tape recording and have a pedal that transcribers can employ to start and stop recordings, so that they do not need to keep having to take their hands off the keyboard when transcribing. Also, if the person who is transcribing finds a certain word or portion of speech inaudible, they can use the digital recording to see if it has been picked up better on that recording. If a transcription machine is not going to be used, this issue does not arise, and the digital recorder represents the superior recording medium anyway. It should also be borne in mind that, regardless of the machine that is used, attending to such issues as using a high-quality microphone and seeking out a venue with as little extraneous noise as possible is still important to recording quality.

Some researchers have adapted to the use of speech-recognition software and the difficulty of getting interviewees voice-trained for the software by using their own voice to speak back all the recording into the microphone, so that their speech alone is processed by the software. They use a headset to listen to the recording and simultaneously speak what is said into the microphone, though it is necessary to keep on stopping and starting the recording that is being listened to.

Digital recordings are not without disadvantages. One is obviously the cost of the recording device. Second, digital audio files, like .wav ones, are huge, so that they require a lot of disk space for storage. Third, there are competing formats for both digital files and voice-to-text software, which can cause compatibility problems.

As with just about everything in conducting social research, there is a cost (other than the financial cost of recording equipment and tapes or disks), in that the use of a recorder may disconcert respondents, who become self-conscious or alarmed at the prospect of their words being preserved. Most people accede to the request for the interview to be recorded, though it is not uncommon for a small number to refuse (see Research in focus 20.7). When faced with refusal, you should still go ahead with the interview, as it is highly likely that useful information will still be forthcoming. This advice also applies to cases of a malfunction in recording equipment (again see Research in focus 20.7). Among those who do agree to

be recorded, there will be some who will not get over their alarm at being confronted with a microphone. As a result, some interviews may not be as interesting as you might have hoped. In qualitative research, there is often quite a large amount of variation in the amount of time that interviews take. For example, in Chattoo and Gilbert's (1999) study of budgeting in what they call 'retired households', the twenty-six interviews they carried out lasted between thirty minutes and three hours; in the research in Research in focus 20.7, the twenty interviews varied between forty-five minutes and three hours. It should not be assumed that shorter interviews are necessarily inferior to longer ones, but very short ones that are

a product of interviewee non-cooperation or anxiety about being recorded are likely to be less useful—though it is not being suggested that this applies to these researchers' shorter interviews. In the extreme, when an interview has produced very little of significance, it may not be

worth the time and cost of transcription. Thankfully, such occasions are relatively unusual. If people do agree to be interviewed, they usually do so in a cooperative way and loosen up after initial anxiety about the microphone. As a result, even short interviews are often quite revealing.



Research in focus 20.7

Getting it taped and transcribed: an illustration of two problems

Rafaeli et al. (1997) conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty female administrators in a university business school in order to study the significance of dress at the workplace. They write:

Everyone we contacted agreed to participate. Interviews took place in participants' offices or in a school lounge and lasted between 45 minutes and three hours. We recorded and transcribed all but two interviews: 1 participant refused to be taped, and the tape recorder malfunctioned during another interview. For interviews not taped, we recorded detailed notes. We assured all participants that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous and hired an outside contractor to transcribe the interviews. (Rafaeli et al. 1997: 14)

Even though, overall, this interview study was highly successful, generating eighteen interviews that were recorded and transcribed, it does show two kinds of problems qualitative interviewers can face—namely, refusals to be recorded and hardware malfunctions. It also suggests that it may be useful not to rely exclusively on hardware and to take notes in the course of an interview so that you will at least have notes if the hardware malfunctions.



Tips and skills

Transcribing interviews

If you are doing research for a project or dissertation, you may not have the resources to pay for professional transcription, and, unless you are an accurate touch typist, it may take you a lot longer than the suggested five–six hours per hour of speech. If you have access to a transcription machine with a foot-operated stop–start mechanism, this will make the task of transcription somewhat easier. However, the important thing to bear in mind is that you must allow sufficient time for transcription and be realistic about how many interviews you are going to be able to transcribe in the time available.

The problem with transcribing interviews is that it is very time-consuming. It is best to allow around five–six hours for **transcription** for every hour of speech. Also, transcription yields vast amounts of paper, which you will need to wade through when analysing the data. Beardsworth and Keil (1992: 262) report that their seventy-three interviews on vegetarianism (see Research in focus 20.3) generated 'several hundred thousand words of transcript material'. It is clear, therefore, that, while transcription has the advantage of keeping intact the interviewee's (and interviewer's) words, it does so by piling up the amount of text to be analysed. It is no wonder that writers like Lofland and Lofland (1995)

advise that the analysis of qualitative data is not left until all the interviews have been completed and transcribed. To procrastinate may give the researcher the impression that he or she faces a monumental task. Also, there are good grounds for making analysis an ongoing activity, because it allows the researcher to be more aware of emerging themes that he or she may want to ask about in a more direct way in later interviews (see Research in focus 20.3 for an example). The preference for ongoing analysis is also very much recommended by proponents of approaches to qualitative data analysis like grounded theory (see Chapter 24).



Student experience

Handling large amounts of qualitative data

Rebecca Barnes found that she collected a large amount of data as a result of transcribing her recordings of semi-structured interviews but help was at hand! She writes:

The sheer amount of data which I had collected (40 transcripts, averaging 30 pages each) was at first quite overwhelming, but using NVivo made it much more manageable.



To read more about Rebecca's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/



Tips and skills

Conventions when using direct quotations from an interview

When transcribing an interview, it is important that the written text reproduces exactly what the interviewee said, word for word. For this reason, if there are parts of the interview that you cannot hear properly on the tape recording, don't be tempted to guess or make them up, instead indicate in your transcript that there is a missing word or phrase—for example, by using the convention {???}. This helps to give the reader confidence in your data-collection process. However, people rarely speak in fully formed sentences, they often repeat themselves and they may have verbal 'tics' in the form of a common word or phrase that is often repeated either through habit or just because they like it! So when it comes to writing up your research, when you will probably wish to quote directly from the interview transcripts, you may want to edit out some of these digressions for the sake of length and ease of understanding. However, you must make sure that you do not paraphrase the words of the speaker and then claim these as the actual words that were spoken, because this is misleading, and there is always the possibility that someone reading your work might suspect that people did not really speak in such a fluent way. The use of certain conventions when quoting from an interview transcript helps to overcome these problems.

- Use quotation marks to indicate that this is a direct quotation or indicate this by consistently setting them out so they stand out from the main body of text—for example, by indenting them or by using a different font, in a similar way to how you would quote at length from a book. This makes it immediately apparent to the reader that this is a direct quotation and it enables you to differentiate between your presentation of the data and your analysis of it.
- If it is appropriate in relation to ethical considerations (see Chapter 6), indicate who is speaking in the quotation, either introducing the speaker before the quotation by saying something like 'As John put it', or 'Anne explained her reasons for this', or attribute the quotation to the interviewee immediately afterwards—for example, by writing his or her pseudonym or [Interviewee 1] in square brackets.
- If you wish to quote the first sentence from a section of speech and then a sentence or two further on from the transcript, use the convention of three consecutive dots to indicate the break point.
- If an interviewee omits a word from a sentence that is a grammatical omission or if the interviewee refers to a subject in a way that does not make its meaning clear and you need to provide the readers with more contextual information so that they can understand the quotation, use the convention of square brackets in which you insert the words you have added.
- Finally, one of the most difficult things about presenting interview data as part of your analysis is that it can take some effort and perseverance to create a smooth flow to the text because of the switches between your 'voice', as the researcher, and the 'voices' of the interviewees, which can make the text seem quite fragmented. For this reason it is important to introduce direct quotations before you present them and then take a sentence or two of your analysis to explain in your own words how you have interpreted them. In this way you construct a narrative that guides the reader through your data and shows why you have chosen the particular quotations you have as illustrative of particular themes or concepts.

It is easy to take the view that transcription is a relatively unproblematic translation of the spoken into the written word. However, given the reliance on transcripts in qualitative research based on interviews, the issue should not be taken lightly. Transcribers need to be trained in much the same way that interviewers do. Moreover, even among experienced transcribers, errors can creep in. Poland (1995) has provided some fascinating examples of mistakes in transcription that can be the result of many different factors (mishearing, fatigue, carelessness). For example, one transcript contained the following passage:

I think unless we want to become like other countries, where people have, you know, democratic freedoms . . .

But the actual words on the audiotape were:

I think unless we want to become like other countries, where people have no democratic freedoms . . . (Poland 1995: 294)

Steps clearly need to be taken to check on the quality of transcription.

It is also worth bearing in mind that it may not always be feasible to record interviews. Grazian (2003) conducted his ethnographic research into the manufacture of authentic blues music in Chicago blues clubs. He started out using a cassette recorder to record interviews with musicians and members of the audience but gave up. He writes that there were several reasons for giving up on the use of tape recorders, of which one was the following: 'I was observing settings where the combination of loud music and chattering customers made the level of background noise extremely high, and thus a recording device would have proved useless' (Grazian 2003: 246).



Tips and skills

Transcribing sections of an interview

Some interviews or at least large portions of them are sometimes not very useful, perhaps because interviewees are reticent or not as relevant to your research topic as you had hoped. There seems little point in transcribing material that you know is unlikely to be fruitful. This is a common experience among qualitative interviewers. Gerson and Horowitz (2002: 211) observe that some qualitative interviews are 'uninspiring and uninteresting', so, if you do find some interviews or portions of them that are not terribly illuminating, you may not be alone in this respect. It may be that, for some of your interviews, it would be better to listen to them closely first, at least once or more usually twice and then transcribe only those portions that you think are useful or relevant. However, this may mean that you miss certain things or that you have to go back to the recordings at a later stage in your analysis to try and find something that emerges as significant only later on.



Student experience

The advantage of transcribing your own interviews

Rebecca Barnes chose to transcribe the recordings of her semi-structured interviews herself. She writes:

I tape-recorded all interviews, and I then transcribed all the tapes myself. I chose to transcribe the interviews myself because, whilst it was an arduous and very time-consuming task, it offered great benefits in terms of bringing me closer to the data, and encouraging me to start to identify key themes, and to become aware of similarities and differences between different participants' accounts.



To read more about Rebecca's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Flexibility in the interview

One further point to bear in mind is that you need to be generally flexible in your approach to interviewing in qualitative research. This advice is not just to do with needing to be responsive to what interviewees say to you and following up interesting points that they make. Such flexibility is important and is an important reminder that, with semi-structured interviewing, you should not turn the interview into a kind of structured interview but with open questions. Flexibility is important in such areas as varying the order of questions, following up leads, and clearing up inconsistencies in answers. Flexibility is important in other respects, such as coping with audio-recording equipment breakdown and refusals by interviewees to allow a recording to take place (see Research in focus 20.7). A further element is that interviewers often find that, as soon as they switch off their recording equipment, the interviewee continues to ruminate on the

topic of interest and frequently will say more interesting things than in the interview. It is usually not feasible to switch the machine back on again, so try to take some notes either while the person is talking or as soon as possible after the interview. Such ‘unsolicited accounts’ can often be the source of revealing information or views (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). This is certainly what Parker found in connection with his research on three British organizations—a National Health Service District Health Authority, a building society, and a manufacturing company—which was based primarily on semi-structured interviews: ‘Indeed, some of the most valuable parts of the interview took place after the tape had been switched off, the closing intimacies of the conversation being prefixed with a silent or explicit “well, if you want to know what I really think . . .”’. Needless to say, a visit to the toilet to write up as much as I could remember followed almost immediately’ (Parker 2000: 236).



Tips and skills

Keep the recorder going

Since interviewees sometimes ‘open up’ at the end of the interview, perhaps just when the recording device has been switched off, there are good grounds for suggesting that you should keep it switched on for as long as possible. So, when you are winding the interview down, don’t switch off the tape recorder immediately.



Student experience

After the interview comments

Tips and skills ‘Keep the recorder going’ suggests that valuable material may be lost if you stop recording as soon as the formal interview is over. This has also been suggested by Warren et al. (2003) and was also mentioned by Hannah Creane.

One of the main issues which arose for me was that often after I had completed my interview and stopped recording, other things were said that were relevant to the interview and were often very interesting, and so unfortunately not all these points were always in my findings.

Hannah mentioned this point when dealing with the issue of whether she had encountered any ethical difficulties in her research. This is interesting, because it raises the question of the ethical status of post-interview remarks. From the interviewee’s point of view, they could be regarded as ‘off the record’. One way of dealing with the ethics of post-interview remarks would be to ask the interviewee whether it is all right to use them for the research once proceedings have finally come to an end.



To read more about Hannah’s research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/.

Telephone interviewing

Telephone interviewing is quite common in survey research, as was noted in Chapter 9. However, it has not been used a great deal in qualitative research. It is likely to have certain benefits when compared to face-to-face qualitative interviewing. One of these inevitably is cost, since it will be much cheaper to conduct qualitative interviews by telephone, just as it is with survey interviewing. It is likely to be especially useful for dispersed groups and when interviewer safety is a consideration. Further, it may be that asking sensitive questions by telephone will be more effective, since interviewees may be less distressed about answering when the interviewer is not physically present.

There is some evidence that there are few differences in the kinds of response that one gets when asking questions by telephone rather than in person. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) were conducting a study of visitors' and correctional officers' views concerning visiting jail inmates in California. Because of some difficulties associated with conducting the study, some respondents had to be interviewed by phone. This allowed a comparison of responses between the telephone and face-to-face interviews. Fifteen visitors were interviewed face-to-face and nineteen by telephone. Nine prison officers were interviewed—six face-to-face and three by telephone. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004: 113) concluded there were no noticeable differences between the responses given in that there were 'similarities in the quantity, nature and depth of responses'. Similarly, Irvine et al. (2010) conducted a small number of semi-structured interviews on the topic of mental health and employment. Some interviews were face-to-face and some were by telephone. Unlike Sturges and Hanrahan, the researchers found that, with the former mode of interviewing, interviewees tended to talk for longer. Interestingly, Irvine et al. also found differences between the two modes in the behaviour of the interviewer. For example, the interviewer was more likely in face-to-face interviews to give vocalized responses to show that she understood what was being said (such as 'yeah' and 'mm hm'). She was also more likely not to finish fully her questions or the questions were less likely to be grammatically correct in the face-to-face mode.

Certain issues about the use of telephone interviewing in qualitative research need to be borne in mind. Most obviously, it will not be appropriate to some groups of interviewees, such as those with no or limited access to telephones. Second, it is unlikely to work well with interviews that are likely to run on for a long time. It is much

easier for the interviewee to terminate a telephone interview than one conducted in person. This is especially significant for qualitative interviews, which are often time-consuming for interviewees. Third, it is not possible to observe body language to see how interviewees respond in a physical sense to questions. Body language may be important because of the interviewer's ability to discern such things as discomfort, puzzlement, or confusion. It should also be borne in mind that there can be technical difficulties with recording interviews. Special equipment is needed, and there is always the possibility that the line will be poor.

My colleagues and I used qualitative telephone interviews for a study of social policy researchers (Sempik et al. 2007; Bryman et al. 2008). The interviews were designed to allow us to probe more deeply into researchers' views about research quality in the field of social policy following the use of an online questionnaire. We found that interviewees were quite expansive in their replies, and there were no significant recording problems. No comparison with in-person interviews of the kind conducted by Sturges and Hanrahan was carried out, but the comprehensive replies suggested that the method can generate detailed and considered replies of the kind typically sought by qualitative researchers. When the saving of time and travel costs is taken into account, given that the interviewees were widely dispersed in the UK, the method can certainly be regarded as highly efficient when viewed in relation to the large volume of data collected. A useful toolkit and examination of interviewing by telephone in qualitative research based in part on a comparison of her use of the two modes has been written by Irving and can be found at:

www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/realities/resources/toolkits/phone-interviews/14-toolkit-phone-interviews.pdf (accessed 8 November 2010).

Life history and oral history interviewing

Two special forms of the kind of interview associated with qualitative research are the *life history* and *oral history* interviews. The former is generally associated with the **life history method**, where it is often combined with various kinds of personal documents such as diaries, photographs, and letters. This method is often referred to alternatively as the **biographical method**. A life history interview invites the subject to look back in detail across his or her entire life course. It has been depicted as documenting 'the inner experience of individuals, how they interpret, understand, and define the world around

them' (Faraday and Plummer 1979: 776). However, the life history method is very much associated with the life history interview, which is a kind of unstructured interview covering the totality of an individual's life. Thomas and Znaniecki, who are among the pioneers of the approach as a result of their early use of it in relation to Polish immigrants to the USA, regarded it as 'the *perfect* type of sociological material' (quoted in Plummer 1983: 64). Their use, in particular, of a solicited autobiography that was written for them by one Polish peasant is regarded as an exemplification of the method.

However, in spite of Thomas and Znaniecki's endorsement, while there was a trickle of studies using the approach over the years (a table in Plummer 1983 points to twenty-six life histories dating from Thomas and Znaniecki's research in the 1910s and the publication of Plummer's book), until the 1990s it was not a popular approach. It has tended to suffer because of an erroneous treatment of the life in question as a sample of one and hence of limited generalizability. However, it has certain clear strengths from the perspective of the qualitative researcher: its unambiguous emphasis on the point of view of the life in question and a clear commitment to the processual aspects of social life, showing how events unfold and interrelate in people's lives. The terms *life history* and *life story* are sometimes employed interchangeably, but R. L. Miller (2000: 19) suggests that the latter is an account someone gives about his or her life and that a life history dovetails a life story with other sources, such as diaries and letters (of the kind discussed in Chapter 23).

An example of the life history interview approach is provided by O. Lewis (1961: p. xxi) in the context of his research on the Sánchez family and their experiences of a Mexican slum:

In the course of our interviews I asked hundreds of questions of [the five members of the Sánchez family] . . . While I used a directive approach to the interviews, I encouraged free association, and I was a good listener. I attempted to cover systematically a wide range of subjects: their earliest memories, their dreams, their hopes, fears, joys, and sufferings; their jobs; their relationship with friends, relatives, employers; their sex life; their concepts of justice, religion, and politics; their knowledge of geography and history; in short, their total world view of the world. Many of my questions stimulated them to express themselves on subjects which they might otherwise never have thought about.

Miller (2000) distinguishes between certain aspects of life history interviews. One distinction has to do with age and life course effects. The former relates to the ageing process, in the sense of biological ageing and its effects and manifestations; life course effects are the patterned features associated with the stages of the life course. He also points to the need to distinguish cohort effects, which are the unique clusters of experiences associated with a specific generation.

An interesting use of the life history method is the research by Laub and Sampson (2004) in connection with the study referred to in Research in focus 3.13 (see also Research in focus 27.4). They approached their reconstruction of the lives of the fifty-two delinquents from the original study in two ways. First, they developed a form of life history calendar that provided their sample with a framework within which they could pinpoint major turning points in their lives, such as marriage, job change, and divorce. Second, they also conducted interviews that invited the fifty-two men to reflect on their life course. They write:

Of particular interest were the questions regarding the participant's assessment of his own life, specifically whether he saw improvement or a worsening since childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood and the self-evaluation of turning points in one's own life course and the relationship to criminal activity and various life course transitions (e.g., marriage, divorce, military service, residential change, and the like). . . . By drawing on the men's own words, narratives helped us unpack mechanisms that connect salient life events across the life course, especially regarding personal choice and situational context. (Laub and Sampson 2004: 93, 94)

Through the collection of these data, the researchers were able to enhance their understanding of the significance of turning points in an individual's life that influence the likelihood of continued involvement in or desistance from crime.

R. L. Miller (2000) suggests there has been a resurgence of interest in recent years and Chamberlayne et al. (2000) argue that there has been a recent 'turn to biographical methods'. To a large extent, the revival of the approach derives from a growth of interest in the role and significance of agency in social life. The revival is largely associated with the growing use of life story interviews and especially those that are often referred to as *narrative interviews*. Moreover, the growing use of such

interviews has come to be associated less and less with the study of a single life (or indeed just one or two lives) and increasingly with the study of several lives (see Research in focus 24.5).

Plummer (2001) draws a useful distinction between three types of life story:

1. *Naturalistic life stories.* These are life stories that occur whenever people reminisce or write autobiographies or diaries, or when job applicants write out letters of application and are interviewed.
2. *Researched life stories.* These are life stories that are solicited by researchers with a social scientific purpose in mind. Most research based on life history/story interviews, like that of Squire (2000), are of this kind.
3. *Reflexive and recursive life stories.* Such life stories recognize that the life story is always a construction in which the interviewer is implicated.

R. Atkinson (2004) observes that the length of the typical life story interview varies considerably but suggests that it usually comprises two or three sessions of between one hour and one-and-a-half hours each. He has provided a catalogue of questions that can be asked and divides these into groups. The following list of categories

and sample questions are taken from Atkinson (1998: 43–53):

- *Birth and family of origin.* For example: 'How would you describe your parents?'
- *Cultural settings and traditions.* For example: 'Was your family different from others in the neighbourhood?'
- *Social factors.* For example: 'What were some of your struggles as a child?'
- *Education.* For example: 'What are your best memories of school?'
- *Love and work.* For example: 'How did you end up in the type of work you do or did?'
- *Historical events or periods.* For example: 'Do you remember what you were doing on any of the really important days in our history?'
- *Retirement.* For example: 'What is the worst part of being retired?'
- *Inner life and spiritual awareness.* For example: 'What are the stresses of being an adult?'
- *Major life themes.* For example: 'What are the crucial decisions in your life?'
- *Vision of the future.* For example: 'Is your life fulfilled yet?'
- *Closure questions.* For example: 'Do you feel that you have given a fair picture of yourself?'



Research in focus 20.8

Constructionism in a life history study of occupational careers

In an article on the concept of occupational career by Bosley, Arnold, and Cohen (2009), an explicitly constructionist stance was taken. Rather than viewing careers as a relatively fixed series of stages through which people progress, Bosley et al. researched careers as social constructions that are highly contingent on a series of experiences and on other individuals who influence the occupational directions that people take. As the authors put it: 'career is seen as social practice, constituted by actors themselves in and through their relationships with others, and as they move through time and space. It is an iterative and on-going process' (2009: 1498). The authors employed a life story method in which twenty-eight employees were interviewed (see Chapter 18 for a brief mention of the sampling method). The interviews 'elicited participants' accounts of their careers from school-leaving to present day. Describing encounters with helpers in the context of preceding and subsequent events enabled participants to recall and identify significant career helpers and the role played by helpers in shaping their careers' (2009: 1499). For each interviewee, a narrative account was generated that portrayed each interviewee's career in terms of contacts, relationships, and encounters that shaped his or her career direction. Out of these narratives, the authors forged a typology of career shaping roles: adviser, informant, witness, gatekeeper, and intermediary. Each role is associated with a different kind of impact on employees' career trajectories and decision-making. The authors write: 'shaping encounters served as a vehicle through which participants negotiated with and navigated through the structural environments in which they were situated' (2009: 1515). The constructionism associated with this research lies in its emphasis on interviewees, and the events and people that were significant in the course and direction of their careers.

One final point to register about the life history interview is that, while it has been presented in this section as a stand-alone technique, the increased interest in its use cannot be detached from the growth of interest in and use of narrative analysis (see Chapter 24). Life history interviewing is often seen as one of the springboards for producing data that can be viewed through a narrative lens. **Narrative analysis** focuses attention on people's stories concerning sequences of events that permeate their lives. Life history interviewing can be a significant tool in eliciting such accounts. See Research in focus 20.8 for an example.

An **oral history interview** is usually somewhat more specific in tone in that the subject is asked to reflect upon specific events or periods in the past. The emphasis is less upon the individual and his or her life than on the particular events in the past. It too is sometimes combined

with other sources, such as documents. The chief problem with the oral history interview (which it shares with the life history interview) is the possibility of bias introduced by memory lapses and distortions (Grele 1998). On the other hand, oral history testimonies have allowed the voices to come through of groups that are typically marginalized in historical research (a point that also applies to life history interviews), either because of their lack of power or because they are typically regarded as unexceptional (Samuel 1976). Bloor (2002) has shown how oral history testimonies, collected in 1973 and 1974, of Welsh miners' experiences of pit life could be used to facilitate an understanding of how they sought collectively to make an impact on their health in the pits and to improve safety. Bloor draws lessons from these testimonies for social policies at the time he was writing.



Feminist research and interviewing in qualitative research

Unstructured and semi-structured interviewing have become extremely prominent methods of data gathering within a feminist research framework. In part, this is a reflection of the preference for qualitative research among feminist researchers, but it also reflects a view that the kind of interview with which qualitative research is associated allows many of the goals of feminist research to be realized. Indeed, the view has been expressed that, 'whilst several brave women in the 1980s defended quantitative methods, it is nonetheless still the case that not just qualitative methods, but the in-depth face-to-face interview has become the paradigmatic "feminist method"' (Kelly et al. 1994: 34). This comment is enlightening because it implies that it is not simply that qualitative research is seen by many writers and researchers as more consistent with a feminist position than quantitative research, but that, specifically, qualitative interviewing is seen as especially appropriate. The point that is being made here is not necessarily that such interviewing is somehow more in tune with feminist values than, say, ethnography (especially since it is often an ingredient of ethnographic research). Instead, it could be that the intensive and time-consuming nature of ethnography means that, although it has great potential as an approach to feminist research (see Chapter 19),

qualitative interviewing is often preferred because it is usually less invasive in these respects.

However, it is specifically interviewing of the kind conducted in qualitative research that is seen as having potential for a feminist approach, not the structured interview with which social survey research is associated. Why might one type of interview be consistent with a sensitivity to feminism and the other not? In a frequently cited article, Oakley outlines the following points about the standard survey interview.

- It is a one-way process—the interviewer extracts information or views from the interviewee.
- The interviewer offers nothing in return for the extraction of information. For example, interviewers using a structured interview do not offer information or their own views if asked. Indeed, they are typically advised not to do such things because of worries about contaminating their respondents' answers.
- The interviewer–interviewee relationship is a form of hierarchical or power relationship. Interviewers arrogate to themselves the right to ask questions, implicitly placing their interviewees in a position of subservience or inferiority.

- The element of power is also revealed by the fact that the structured interview seeks out information from the perspective of the researcher.
- Because of these points, the standard survey interview is inconsistent with feminism when women interview other women. This view arises because it is seen as indefensible for women to 'use' other women in these ways.

Instead of this framework for conducting interviews, feminist researchers advocate one that establishes:

- a high level of rapport between interviewer and interviewee;
- a high degree of reciprocity on the part of the interviewer;
- the perspective of the women being interviewed;
- a non-hierarchical relationship.

In connection with the reciprocity that she advocates, Oakley noted, for example, that, in her research on the transition to motherhood, she was frequently asked questions by her respondents. She argues that it was ethically indefensible for a feminist not to answer when faced with questions of a certain kind with which she was confronted (see page 229 for an illustration of this point). For Oakley, therefore, the qualitative interview was viewed as a means of resolving the dilemmas that she encountered as a feminist interviewing other women. However, as noted in previous chapters, while this broad

adherence to a set of principles for interviewing in feminist research continues, it has been tempered by a greater recognition of the possible value of quantitative research.

An interesting dilemma that is perhaps not so easily resolved is the question of what feminist researchers should do when their own 'understandings and interpretations of women's accounts would either not be shared by some of them [i.e. the research participants], and/or represent a form of challenge or threat to their perceptions, choices and coping strategies' (Kelly et al. 1994: 37). It is the first type of situation that will be examined, at least in part, because, while it is of particular significance to feminist researchers, its implications are somewhat broader. It raises the tricky question of how far the commitment of seeing through the eyes of the people you study can and/or should be stretched. Two examples are relevant here. Reinharz (1992: 28–9) cites the case of an American study by Andersen (1981), who interviewed twenty 'corporate wives', who came across as happy with their lot and were supportive of feminism only in relation to employment discrimination. Andersen interpreted their responses to her questions as indicative of 'false consciousness'—in other words, she did not really believe her interviewees. When Andersen wrote an article on her findings, the women wrote a letter rejecting her account, affirming that women can be fulfilled as wives and mothers. A similar situation confronted Millen (1997: 4.6) when she interviewed thirty-two British female scientists using 'semi-structured, in-depth individual interviewing'. As she puts it:



Student experience

Feminism and the choice of semi-structured interviews

The potential of the semi-structured interview for feminist researchers as a means of allowing women's voices to be heard and in their own words was important to Erin Sanders in the context of her research on sex workers in Thailand.

My feminist background influenced my decision to employ feminist research methods. I used in-depth, semi-structured interviews because I wanted the women I interviewed to be able to express their ideas and their thoughts in their own way—I wanted their voices and their stories to be heard, rather than my own words and ideas directing their thoughts.



To read more about Erin's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

There was a tension between my interpretation of their reported experience as sex-based, and the meaning the participants themselves tended to attribute to their experience, since the majority of respondents did not analyse these experiences in terms of patriarchy or sex–gender systems, but considered them to be individualised, or as ‘just something that had to be coped with’. . . . From my external, academically privileged vantage point, it is clear that sexism pervades these professions, and that men are assumed from the start by other scientists to be competent scientists of status whilst women have to prove themselves, overcome the barrier of their difference before they are accepted. These women, on the other hand, did not generally view their interactions in terms of gendered social systems. There is therefore a tension between their characterisation of their experience and my interpretation of it . . . (Millen 1997: 5.6, 5.9)

Three interesting issues are thrown up by these two accounts. First, how can such a situation arise? This is an issue that pervades qualitative research that makes claims to reveal social reality as viewed by members of the setting in question. If researchers are genuinely seeing through others’ eyes, the ‘tension’ to which Millen

refers should not arise. However, it clearly can and does, and this strongly suggests that qualitative researchers are more affected by their own perspectives and research questions when collecting and analysing data than might be expected from textbook accounts of the research process. Second, there is the question of how to handle such a ‘tension’—that is, how do you reconcile the two accounts? Andersen’s (1981) solution to the tension she encountered was to reinterpret her findings in terms of the conditions that engender the contentment she uncovered. Third, given that feminist research is often concerned with wider political goals of emancipation, a tension between participants’ worldviews and the researcher’s position raises moral questions about the appropriateness of imposing an interpretation that is not shared by research participants themselves. Such an imposition could hardly be regarded as consistent with the principle of a non-hierarchical relationship in the interview situation.

Therefore, while qualitative interviewing has become a highly popular research method for feminist researchers because of its malleability into a form that can support the principles of feminism, interesting questions are raised in terms of the relationship between researchers’ and participants’ accounts. Such questions have a significance generally for the conduct of qualitative research.



Qualitative interviewing versus participant observation

The aim of this section is to compare the merits and limitations of interviewing in qualitative research with those of participant observation. These are probably the two most prominent methods of data collection in qualitative research, so there is some virtue in assessing their strengths, a debate that was first begun many years ago (Becker and Geer 1957; Trow 1957). In this section, interviewing is being compared to participant observation rather than ethnography, because the latter invariably entails a significant amount of interviewing. So too does participant observation, but in this discussion I will be following the principle that I outlined in Key concept 19.1—namely, that the term will be employed to refer to the specifically observational activities in which the participant observer engages. As noted in Key concept 19.1, the term ‘ethnography’ is being reserved for the wide range of data-collection activities in which ethnographers

engage—one of which is participant observation—along with the written account that is a product of those activities.

Advantages of participant observation in comparison to qualitative interviewing

The following is an examination of the ways in which participant observation exhibits advantages over qualitative interviewing.

Seeing through others’ eyes

As noted in Chapters 2 and 17, seeing through others’ eyes is one of the main tenets of qualitative research, but, on the face of it, the participant observer would seem to be better placed for gaining a foothold on social reality

in this way. The researcher's prolonged immersion in a social setting would seem to make him or her better equipped to see as others see. The participant observer is in much closer contact with people for a longer period of time; also, he or she participates in many of the same kinds of activity as the members of the social setting being studied. Research that relies on interviewing alone is likely to entail much more fleeting contacts, though in qualitative research interviews can last many hours, and re-interviewing is not unusual.

Learning the native language

Becker and Geer (1957) argued that the participant observer is in the same position as a social anthropologist visiting a distant land, in that in order to understand a culture the language must be learned. However, it is not simply the formal language that must be understood in the case of the kinds of social research in which a participant observer in a complex urban society engages. It is also very often the 'argot'—the special uses of words and slang—that is important to penetrate that culture. Such an understanding is arrived at through the observation of language use.

The taken for granted

The interview relies primarily on verbal behaviour, and, as such, matters that interviewees take for granted are less likely to surface than in participant observation, where such implicit features in social life are more likely to be revealed as a result of the observer's continued presence and because of the ability to observe behaviour rather than just rely on what is said.

Deviant and hidden activities

Much of what we know about criminal and deviant subcultures has been gleaned from participant observation. These are areas that insiders are likely to be reluctant to talk about in an interview context alone. Understanding is again likely to come through prolonged interaction. Many of the examples in Chapter 19 entailed participant observation of criminal or deviant worlds, such as drug taking, violent gangs, pilferage, illegal commerce, and hooliganism. Ethnographers conducting participant observation are more likely to place themselves in situations in which their continued involvement allows them gradually to infiltrate such social worlds and to insinuate themselves into the lives of people who might be sensitive to outsiders. For similar reasons, participant observers have found that they are able to gain access to areas like patterns of resistance at work or to groups of people who support a generally despised ideology, like the National Front.

Sensitivity to context

The participant observer's extensive contact with a social setting allows the context of people's behaviour to be mapped out fully. The participant observer interacts with people in a variety of different situations and possibly roles, so that the links between behaviour and context can be forged.

Encountering the unexpected and flexibility

It may be that, because of the unstructured nature of participant observation, it is more likely to uncover unexpected topics or issues. Except with the most unstructured forms of interview, the interview process is likely to entail some degree of closure as the interview guide is put together, which may blinker the researcher slightly. Also, participant observation may be more flexible because of the tendency for interviewers to instil an element of comparability (and hence a modicum of structure) in their questioning of different people. Ditton's (1977) decision at a very late stage in the data-collection process to focus on pilferage in the bakery in which he was a participant observer is an example of this feature (see Research in focus 19.1).

Naturalistic emphasis

Participant observation has the potential to come closer to a naturalistic emphasis, because the qualitative researcher confronts members of a social setting in their natural environments. Interviewing, because of its nature as a disruption of members' normal flow of events, even when it is at its most informal, is less amenable to this feature.

Advantages of qualitative interviewing in comparison to participant observation

The following is an examination of the ways in which qualitative interviewing exhibits advantages over participant observation.

Issues resistant to observation

It is likely that there is a wide range of issues that are simply not amenable to observation, so that asking people about them represents the only viable means of finding out about them within a qualitative research strategy. For example, consider Beardsworth and Keil's (1992) research on vegetarianism (see Research in focus 20.3). It is not really feasible for investigators to insinuate themselves into the lives of vegetarians in order to uncover issues like reasons for their conversion to this eating strategy. For most people, vegetarianism is a matter

that surfaces only at certain points, such as meals and shopping. It is not really sensible or feasible to carry out participant observation in relation to something like this, which is clearly highly episodic.

Reconstruction of events

Qualitative research frequently entails the reconstruction of events by asking interviewees to think back over how a certain series of events unfolded in relation to a current situation. Beardsworth and Keil (1992; see Research in focus 20.3) employed the symbolic interactionist notion of *career* to gain an understanding of how people came to be vegetarians. Similarly, for their

study of the impact of male unemployment, McKee and Bell (1985; see Thinking deeply 3.3, and the reference to this work in Chapter 17) asked husbands and their wives to reconstruct events following unemployment. Yet another example is Pettigrew's (1985) research on Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), which entailed interviewing about contemporaneous events but also included 'retrospective interviewing', as Pettigrew (1985) calls it (see Research in focus 3.16). This reconstruction of events is something that cannot be accomplished through participant observation alone. See Research in focus 20.9 for a further example of the use of the interview to elicit a reconstruction of events.



Research in focus 20.9 Information through interviews: research on prostitution

McKeganey and Barnard (1996) have discussed their strategies for conducting research into prostitutes and their clients. Their research was based in a red light area in Glasgow. Their approach was largely that of Non-Participating Observer with Interaction (see Figure 19.2), in that their research was based primarily on interviews with prostitutes and their clients, as well as some (frequently accidental) observation of interactions and overheard conversations. The interviews they conducted were especially important in gaining information in relation to such areas as: how the prostitutes had moved into this line of work; permitted and prohibited sex acts; links with drug use; experience of violence; and the management of identity. In the following passage, a prostitute reconstructs her movement into prostitution:

I was 14 and I'd run away from home. I ended up down in London where I met a pimp. . . . He'd got me a place to stay, buying me things and everything and I ended up sleeping with him as well. . . . One night we got really drunk and stoned and he brought someone in. . . . [Then] after it happened I thought it was bad, I didn't like it but at least I was getting paid for it. I'd been abused by my granddad when I was 11 and it didn't seem a million miles from that anyway. (McKeganey and Barnard 1996: 25)

Ethical considerations

There are certain areas that could be observed—albeit indirectly through hidden hardware like a microphone—but that would raise ethical considerations. The research by McKeganey and Barnard (1996; see Research in focus 20.9) on prostitution furnishes an example of this. One of the areas they were especially interested in was negotiations between prostitutes and their clients over the use of condoms in the light of the spread of HIV/AIDS infection. It is not inconceivable that such transactions could have been observed with the aid of hidden hardware and it is possible that some prostitutes would have agreed to being wired up for this purpose. However, clients would

not have been party to such agreements, so that ethical principles of informed consent and invasion of privacy would have been transgressed (see Key concept 6.1). As a result, the researchers relied on interview accounts of such negotiations or of prostitutes' stances on the matter (see Research in focus 20.9), as well as the views of a small number of clients.

Reactive effects

The question of reactive effects is by no means a straightforward matter. As with structured observation (see Chapter 12), it might be anticipated that the presence of a participant observer would result in reactive effects

(see Key concept 12.4). People's knowledge of the fact that they are being observed may make them behave less naturally. However, participant observers, like researchers using structured observation, typically find that people become accustomed to their presence and begin to behave more naturally the longer they are around. Indeed, members of social settings sometimes express surprise when participant observers announce their imminent departure when they are on the verge of disengagement. Interviewers clearly do not suffer from the same kind of problem, but it could be argued that the unnatural character of the interview encounter can also be regarded as a context within which reactive effects may emerge. Participant observation also suffers from the related problem of observers disturbing the very situation being studied, because conversations and interactions will occur in conjunction with the observer that otherwise would not happen. This is by no means an easy issue to resolve and it seems likely that both participant observation and qualitative interviewing set in motion reactive effects but of different kinds.

Less intrusive in people's lives

Participant observation can be very intrusive in people's lives in that the observer is likely to take up a lot more of their time than in an interview. Interviews in qualitative research can sometimes be very long, and re-interviewing is not uncommon, but the impact on people's time will probably be less than having to take observers into account on a regular basis, though it is likely that this feature will vary from situation to situation. Participant observation is likely to be especially intrusive in terms of the amount of people's time taken up when it is in organizational settings. In work organizations, there is a risk that the rhythms of work lives will be disrupted.

Longitudinal research easier

One of the advantages of participant observation is that it is inherently longitudinal in character, because the observer is present in a social setting for a period of time. As a result, change and connections between events can be observed. However, there are limits to the amount of time that participant observers can devote to being away from their normal routines. Consequently, participant observation does not usually extend much beyond two to three years in duration. When participant observation is being conducted into an area of research that is episodic rather than requiring continued observation, a longer time period may be feasible. Armstrong's (1993) research on football hooliganism, which was referred to several times in Chapters 17 and 18, entailed six years of participant

observation, but, since football hooligans are not engaged full-time in this area of activity, the research did not require the researcher's continued absence from his work and other personal commitments. Interviewing can be carried out within a longitudinal research design somewhat more easily because repeat interviews may be easier to organize than repeat visits to participant observers' research settings, though the latter is not impossible (e.g. Burgess 1987, who revisited the comprehensive school in which he had conducted participant observation). Following up interviewees on several occasions is likely to be easier than returning to research sites on a regular basis.

Greater breadth of coverage

In participant observation, the researcher is invariably constrained in his or her interactions and observations to a fairly restricted range of people, incidents, and localities. Participant observation in a large organization, for example, is likely to mean that knowledge of that organization far beyond the confines of the department or section in which the observation is carried out is likely not to be very extensive. Interviewing can allow access to a wider variety of people and situations.

Specific focus

As noted in Chapter 17, qualitative research sometimes begins with a specific focus, and indeed Silverman (1993) has been critical of the notion that it should be regarded as an open-ended form of research. Qualitative interviewing would seem to be better suited to such a situation, since the interview can be directed at that focus and its associated research questions. Thus, the research by my colleagues and myself on the police had a very specific research focus in line with its Home Office funding—namely, conceptions of leadership among police officers (Bryman, Stephens, and A Campo 1996). The bulk of the data gathering was in two police forces and entailed the interviewing of police officers at all levels using a semi-structured interview guide. Because it had such a clear focus, it was more appropriate to conduct the research by interview rather than participant observation, since issues to do with leadership notions may not crop up on a regular basis, which would make observation a very extravagant method of data collection.

Overview

When Becker and Geer (1957: 28) proclaimed in the mid-twentieth century that the 'most complete form of the sociological datum . . . is the form in which the

participant observer gathers it', Trow (1957: 33) reprimanded them for making such a universal claim and argued that 'the problem under investigation properly dictates the methods of investigation'. The latter view is very much the one taken in this book. Research methods are appropriate to researching some issues and areas but not others. The discussion of the merits and limitations of participant observation and qualitative interviews is meant simply to draw attention to some of the considerations that might be taken into account if there is a genuine opportunity to use one or the other in a study.

Equally, and to repeat an earlier point, the comparison is a somewhat artificial exercise, because participant

observation is usually carried out as part of ethnographic research, and as such it is usually accompanied by interviewing as well as other methods. In other words, participant observers frequently buttress their observations with methods of data collection that allow them access to important areas that are not amenable to observation. However, the aim of the comparison was to provide a kind of balance sheet in considering the strengths and limitations of a reliance on either participant observation or qualitative interview alone. Its aim is to draw attention to some of the factors that might be taken into account in deciding how to plan a study and even how to evaluate existing research.



Checklist

Issues to consider for your qualitative interview

- ☐ Have you devised a clear and comprehensive/informative way of introducing the research to interviewees?
- ☐ Does your interview guide clearly relate to your research questions?
- ☐ Have you piloted the guide with some appropriate respondents?
- ☐ Have you thought about what you will do if your interviewee does not turn up for the interview?
- ☐ Does the guide contain a good mixture of different kinds of questions, such as probing, specifying, and direct questions?
- ☐ Have you ensured that interviews will allow novel or unexpected themes and issues to arise?
- ☐ Is your language in the questions clear, comprehensible, and free of unnecessary jargon?
- ☐ Are your questions relevant to the people you are proposing to interview?
- ☐ Does your interview guide include requests for information about the interviewee, such as his or her age, work experience, position in the firm?
- ☐ Have your questions been designed to elicit reflective discussions so that interviewees are not tempted to answer in 'yes' or 'no' terms?
- ☐ Do your questions offer a real prospect of seeing the world from your interviewees' point of view rather than imposing your own frame of reference on them?
- ☐ Are you familiar with the setting(s) in which the interviews will take place?
- ☐ Are you thoroughly familiar with and have you tested your recording equipment?
- ☐ Have you thought about how you will present yourself in the interview, such as how you will be dressed?
- ☐ Have you thought about how you will go about putting into operation the criteria of a good interviewer?



Key points

- Interviewing in qualitative research is typically of the unstructured or semi-structured kind.
- In qualitative research, interviewing may be the sole method in an investigation or may be used as part of an ethnographic study, or indeed in tandem with another qualitative method.
- Qualitative interviewing is meant to be flexible and to seek out the world views of research participants.
- If an interview guide is employed, it should not be too structured in its application and should allow some flexibility in the asking of questions.
- The qualitative interview should be recorded and then transcribed.
- Interviewing in qualitative research can exhibit a variety of forms, such as life history and oral history interviewing.
- The qualitative interview has become an extremely popular method of data collection in feminist studies.
- Whether to use participant observation or qualitative interviews depends in large part on their relative suitability to the research questions being addressed. However, it must also be borne in mind that participant observers invariably conduct some interviews in the course of their investigations.



Questions for review

- Outline the main types of interview employed by qualitative researchers.

Differences between the structured interview and the qualitative interview

- How does qualitative interviewing differ from structured interviewing?

Asking questions in the qualitative interview

- What are the differences between unstructured and semi-structured interviewing?
- Could semi-structured interviewing stand in the way of flexibility in qualitative research?
- What are the differences between life history and oral history interviews?
- What kinds of consideration need to be borne in mind when preparing an interview guide?
- What kinds of question might be asked in an interview guide?
- What kinds of skills does the interviewer need to develop in qualitative interviewing?
- Why is it important to record and transcribe qualitative interviews?
- What role might vignette questions play in qualitative interviewing?

Life and oral history interviewing

- What are the main kinds of life history interview and what are their respective uses?
- Why might the life history interview be significant for a researcher employing a narrative analysis approach?

Feminist research and interviewing in qualitative research

- Why has the qualitative interview become such a prominent research method for feminist researchers?
- What dilemmas might be posed for feminist researchers using qualitative interviewing?

Qualitative interviewing versus participant observation

- Outline the relative advantages and disadvantages of qualitative interviewing and participant observation.
- Does one method seem more in tune with the preoccupations of qualitative researchers than the other?

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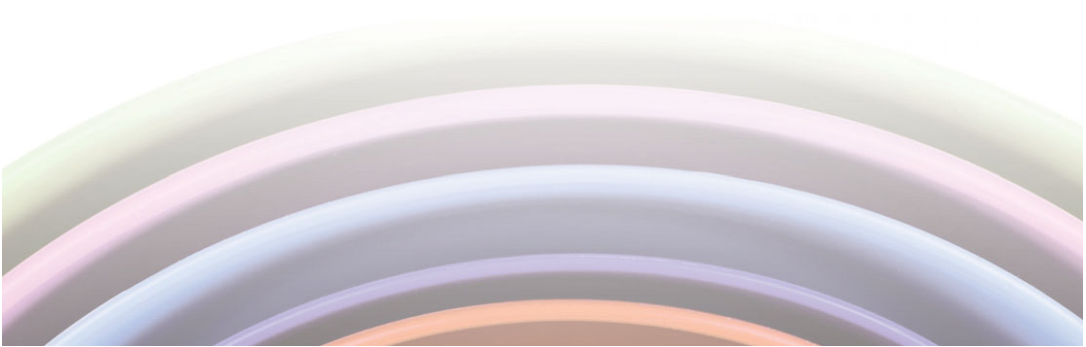
Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of interviewing in qualitative research. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.

21

Focus groups

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Chapter guide

The focus group method is an interview with several people on a specific topic or issue. It has been used extensively in market research but has only relatively recently made inroads into social research. This chapter explores:

- the possible reasons for preferring focus group interviews to individual interviews of the kind discussed in the previous chapter;
- how focus groups should be conducted in terms of such features as the need for recording, the number and size of groups, how participants can be selected, and how direct the questioning should be;
- the significance of interaction between participants in focus group discussions;
- some practical difficulties with focus group sessions, such as the possible loss of control over proceedings and the potential for unwanted group effects.

Introduction

We are used to thinking of the interview as something that involves an interviewer and one interviewee. Most textbooks reinforce this perception by concentrating on individual interviews. The **focus group** technique is a method of interviewing that involves more than one, usually at least four, interviewees. Essentially it is a group interview. Some authors draw a distinction between the focus group and the group interview techniques. Three reasons are sometimes put forward to suggest a distinction.

- Focus groups typically emphasize a specific theme or topic that is explored in depth, whereas group interviews often span very widely.
- Sometimes group interviews are carried out so that the researcher is able to save time and money by carrying out interviews with a number of individuals simultaneously. However, focus groups are not carried out for this reason.
- The focus group practitioner is invariably interested in the ways in which individuals discuss a certain issue *as members of a group*, rather than simply as individuals. In other words, with a focus group the researcher will be interested in such things as how people respond to each other's views and build up a view out of the interaction that takes place within the group.

However, the distinction between the focus group method and the group interview is by no means clear cut, and the two terms are frequently employed interchangeably. Nonetheless, the definition proposed in Key concept 21.1 provides a starting point.

Most focus group researchers undertake their work within the traditions of qualitative research. This means that they are explicitly concerned to reveal how the group participants view the issues with which they are confronted; therefore, the researcher will aim to provide a fairly unstructured setting for the extraction of their views and perspectives. The person who runs the focus groups session is usually called the **moderator** or **facilitator**, and he or she will be expected to guide each session but not to be too intrusive.

Another general point about the focus group method is that, while it has been gaining in popularity since the 1980s, it is by no means a new technique. It has been used for many years in market research, where it is employed for such purposes as testing responses to new products and advertising initiatives (see Thinking deeply 21.1 for an example). In fact, there is a large literature within market research to do with the practices that are associated with focus group research and their implementation (e.g. Calder 1977).



Key concept 21.1

What is the focus group method?

The focus group method is a form of group interview in which: there are several participants (in addition to the moderator/facilitator); there is an emphasis in the questioning on a particular fairly tightly defined topic; and the accent is upon interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning. As such, the focus group contains elements of two methods: the group interview, in which several people discuss a number of topics; and what has been called a focused interview, in which interviewees are selected because they 'are known to have been involved in a particular situation' (Merton et al. 1956: 3) and are asked about that involvement.

The focused interview may be administered to individuals or to groups. Thus, the focus group method appends to the focused interview the element of interaction within groups as an area of interest and is more focused than the group interview.



Thinking deeply 21.1

The real and the unreal thing: focus groups in market research

On 23 April 1985 a product was launched that proved to be one of the greatest marketing blunders in business history. On that day, the Coca-Cola company not only launched what it called its New Coke, but it removed from sale the old one, on which the massive corporation had been built. New Coke was a flop, and the public clamoured for the return of its predecessor, in spite of assurances from the company that people would get used to the new formula and get to like it better. Yet close attention to data drawn from focus group research that the company had commissioned in the lead-up to the launch of New Coke might have prevented the disaster from happening. In 1982 and 1983 focus group research was conducted across the USA. At one point in each session, local consumers were presented with a scenario in which they were told that a new formula for a certain product had been introduced and that the response to it was very favourable. The participants were then asked how *they* would feel when that product came to their town and replaced the traditional one. The response to the prospect of new, improved Budweiser beer and of Hershey chocolate bars being replaced was positive. However, when the replacement of Coke was being considered, the consumers became vehemently antagonistic to the idea. Taste tests had shown that consumers liked New Coke, but they had not been asked how they would feel if traditional Coke was taken off supermarket shelves. The focus groups made it clear how they would feel, but Coca-Cola's chief executive officer was determined to plough ahead, and his assistant, who liaised with the firm conducting the focus groups, chose to follow his boss's lead.

Sources: Pendergrast (1993) and Greising (1998).

One final general point to register is that there is growing interest in the use of online focus groups, which will be covered in the context of Internet-based research methods in Chapter 28. There is evidence that, although they tend to be shorter than comparable face-to-face focus groups, they can generate a considerable amount

of relevant data for the researcher (Reid and Reid 2005). When this is viewed in relation to the saving in time travelling and cost for both researchers and participants, it is clear that this is a form of the method that is likely to be used more and more in the future.



Uses of focus groups

What are the uses of the focus group method? In many ways its uses are bound up with the uses of qualitative research in general, but, over and above these, the following points can be registered.

- The original idea for the focus group—the focused interview—was that people who were known to have had a certain experience could be interviewed in a relatively unstructured way about that experience. The bulk of the discussion by Merton et al. (1956) of the notion of the focused interview was in terms of individual interviews, but their book also considered the extension of the method into group interview contexts. Subsequently, the focus group has become a popular method for researchers examining the ways in which people in conjunction with one another construe the general topics in which the researcher is interested. One of the best-known studies using the method in the context of a social scientific topic is Morgan and Spanish's (1985) study of the ways in which people organize knowledge about health issues. Their special interest was the question of people's knowledge about who has heart attacks and why they have them. Thus, the emphasis was on how focus group participants make sense of the causation of heart attacks in terms of the knowledge they have picked up over the years. However, a major impetus for the growing use of focus groups in social research has been their intensive use in the field of media and cultural studies. The growing emphasis in these fields is on what is known as 'audience reception'—how audiences respond to television and radio programmes, films, newspaper articles, and so on (McGuigan 1992; Fenton et al. 1998: ch. 1). An influential study in this context was Morley's (1980) research on *Nationwide*, a British news programme shown in the early evening that was popular in the 1970s. Morley organized focus groups made up of specific categories of people (for example, managers, trade unionists, students) and showed them recordings of the programme. He found that the different groups arrived at somewhat divergent interpretations of the programmes they had watched, implying that meaning does not reside solely in the programmes but also in the ways in which they are watched and interpreted. This research and the increasing attention paid to audience reception set in motion a growth of interest in the use of the focus group method for the study of audience interpretations of cultural and media texts.
- The technique allows the researcher to develop an understanding about *why* people feel the way they do. In a normal individual interview the interviewee is often asked about his or her reasons for holding a particular view, but the focus group approach offers the opportunity of allowing people to probe each other's reasons for holding a certain view. This can be more interesting than the sometimes predictable question-followed-by-answer approach of normal interviews. For one thing, an individual may answer in a certain way during a focus group, but, as he or she listens to others' answers, he or she may want to qualify or modify a view; or alternatively may want to voice agreement to something that he or she probably would not have thought of without the opportunity of hearing the views of others. These possibilities mean that focus groups may also be very helpful in the elicitation of a wide variety of different views in relation to a particular issue.
- In focus groups participants are able to bring to the fore issues in relation to a topic that they deem to be important and significant. This is clearly an aim of individual interviews too, but, because the moderator has to relinquish a certain amount of control to the participants, the issues that concern them can surface. This is clearly an important consideration in the context of qualitative research, since the viewpoints of the people being studied are an important point of departure.
- In conventional one-to-one interviewing, interviewees are rarely challenged; they might say things that are inconsistent with earlier replies or that patently could not be true, but we are often reluctant to point out such deficiencies. In the context of a focus group, individuals will often argue with each other and challenge each other's views. This process of arguing means that the researcher may stand a chance of ending up with more realistic accounts of what people think, because they are forced to think about and possibly revise their views.

- The focus group offers the researcher the opportunity to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it. It is a central tenet of theoretical positions like symbolic interactionism that the process of coming to terms with (that is, understanding) social phenomena is not undertaken by individuals in isolation from each other. Instead, it is something that occurs in interaction and discussion with others. In this sense, therefore, focus groups reflect the processes through which meaning is constructed in everyday life and to that extent can be regarded as more naturalistic (see Key concept 3.4 on the idea of naturalism) than individual interviews (S. Wilkinson 1998).
- The use of focus groups by feminist researchers has grown considerably in recent years, and S. Wilkinson (1998, 1999b) has argued that it has great potential in this regard. Its appeal to feminist researchers is its compatibility with the ethics and politics of feminism.

As we have seen in previous chapters, feminist researchers are suspicious of research methods that are exploitative and create a power relationship between the female researcher and the female respondent. Wilkinson observes that the risk of this occurring is greatly reduced because focus group participants are able to take over much of the direction of the session from the moderator. Indeed, they may even subvert the goals of the session in ways that could be of considerable interest to the moderator. As a result, participants' points of view are much more likely to be revealed than in a traditional interview. This kind of argument has been extended to suggest focus groups may have a further role in allowing the voices of highly marginalized groups of women to surface. Madriz (2000: 843) argues that, for a group like lower-socio-economic-class women of colour, focus groups constitute a relatively rare opportunity for them to 'empower themselves by making sense of their experience of vulnerability and subjugation'.



Conducting focus groups

There are a number of practical aspects of the conduct of focus group research that require some discussion.

Recording and transcription

As with interviewing for qualitative research, the focus group session will work best if it is recorded and subsequently transcribed. The following reasons are often used to explain this preference.

- One reason is the simple difficulty of writing down not only exactly what people say but also who says it. In an individual interview you might be able to ask the respondent to hold on while you write something down, but to do this in the context of an interview involving several people would be extremely disruptive.
- The researcher will be interested in who expresses views within the group, such as whether certain individuals seem to act as opinion leaders or dominate the discussion. This also means that there is an interest in ranges of opinions within groups; for example, in a session, does most of the range of opinion derive from just one or two people or from most of the people in the group?
- A major reason for conducting focus group research is the fact that it is possible to study the processes whereby meaning is collectively constructed within each session (see above). It would be very difficult to do this by taking notes, because of the need to keep track of *who* says what (see also previous point). If this element is lost, the dynamics of the focus group session would also be lost, and a major rationale for doing focus group interviews rather than individual ones would be undermined.
- Like all qualitative researchers, the focus group practitioner will be interested in not just what people say but *how* they say it—for example, the particular language that they employ. There is every chance that the nuances of language will be lost if the researcher has to rely exclusively on notes.

It should be borne in mind that transcribing focus group sessions is more complicated and hence more time-consuming than transcribing traditional interview recordings. This is because you need to take account of *who* is talking in the session, as well as what is said. This is sometimes difficult, since people's voices are not always easy to distinguish. Also, people sometimes talk over each other, which can make transcription even more



Tips and skills

Transcription of a focus group interview

In Tips and skills 'Transcribing sections of an interview' (see Chapter 20), I pointed out that it may not always be desirable or feasible to transcribe the whole of the interview. The same applies to focus group research, which is often more difficult and time-consuming to transcribe than personal interview recordings because of the number of speakers who are involved. The suggestions I made in Chapter 18 in relation to transcribing sections of an interview therefore apply equally well to focus group recordings.

difficult. In addition, it is extremely important to ensure that you equip yourself with a very high-quality microphone, which is capable of picking up voices, some of which may be quite faint, from many directions. Focus group transcripts always seem to have more missing bits because of lack of audibility than transcripts from conventional interviews.

How many groups?

How many groups do you need? Table 21.1 provides data on the number of groups and other aspects of the composition of focus groups in several studies based on this method and follows a similar table in Deacon, Pickering, Golding, and Murdock (1999) in taking the view that this is a helpful way of providing basic information on this issue. As Table 21.1 suggests, there is a good deal of variation in the numbers of groups used in the studies referred to, with a range from eight to fifty-two. However, there does seem to be a tendency for the range to be mainly from ten to fifteen.

Clearly, it is unlikely that just one group will suffice the needs of the researcher, since there is always the possibility that the responses are particular to that one group. Obviously, time and resources will be a factor, but there are strong arguments for saying that too many groups will be a waste of time. Calder (1977) proposes that, when the moderator reaches the point that he or she is able to anticipate fairly accurately what the next group is going to say, then there are probably enough groups already. This notion is very similar to the theoretical saturation criterion that was introduced in Key concept 18.4. In other words, once your major analytic categories have been saturated, there seems little point in continuing, and so it would be appropriate to bring data collection to a halt. For their study of audience discussion programmes, Livingstone and Lunt (1994: 181) used saturation as a criterion: 'The number of focus groups

was determined by continuing until comments and patterns began to repeat and little new material was generated.' When this point of saturation is reached, as an alternative to terminating data collection, there may be a case for moving on to an extension of the issues that have been raised in the focus group sessions that have been carried out.

One factor that may affect the number of groups is whether the researcher feels that the kinds and range of views are likely to be affected by socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, class, and so on. Many focus group researchers like to use stratifying criteria like these to ensure that groups with a wide range of features will be included. If so, a larger number of groups may be required to reflect the criteria. In connection with the research described in Research in focus 21.1, Kitzinger (1994) writes that a large number of groups was preferred, not because of concerns about the representativeness of the views gleaned during the sessions, but in order to capture as much diversity in perspectives as possible. However, it may be that high levels of diversity are not anticipated in connection with some topics, in which case a large number of groups could represent an unnecessary expense.

One further point to bear in mind when considering the number of groups is that more groups will increase the complexity of your analysis. For example, Schlesinger et al. (1992: 29; see Table 21.1) report that the fourteen tape-recorded sessions they organized produced over 1,400 pages of transcription. This pile of paper was accumulated from discussions in each group of an average of one hour for each of the four screenings of violence that session participants were shown. Although this means that the sessions were longer than is normally the case, it does demonstrate that the amount of data to analyse can be very large, even though a total of fourteen sessions may not sound a lot to someone unfamiliar with the workings of the method.

Table 21.1

Composition of groups in focus group research

Authors	Morgan and Spanish (1985)	Schlesinger et al. (1992)	Kizinger (1993, 1994)	Lupton (1996)	Macnaughten and Jacobs (1997)	Fenton et al. (1998)	Livingstone and Bober (2003); Livingstone (2006)	Warr (2005)	Silva and Wright (2005); Silva et al. (2009); Bennett et al. (2009)
Area of research	Lay health beliefs concerning heart attacks	The responses of women to watching violence	Audience responses to media messages about AIDS	Responses to controversies concerning diet and health	Public understanding of and identification with sustainable development	Audience responses to reporting of social science research	Children's use and experience of using the Internet	Expectations regarding intimate relationships in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts	Cultural tastes and activities. Each focus group was allocated a pair of topics specific to that group.
Number of groups	9	14	52	12	8 (each group had 2 sessions)	14	14	8	25
Size range of groups	4–5	5–9	Not specified but appears to be 3–9 or 3–10	3–5	6–10	4–6	Not specified	4–9	2–8
Average (mean) size of groups	4.4	6.6	6.75	4.1	Approximately 8	5	4	Not clear	5.7
Stratifying criteria (if any)	None mentioned, but all participants needed to be aged 35–50 and those who had experienced a heart attack were excluded	Experience of violence, Scottish/English ethnicity, social class	None, but groups made up of specific groups (e.g. civil engineers, retirement club members, male prostitutes)	Gender	Age, ethnicity, gender, occupation/retired, rural/urban location	Gender, education, occupation (private/public sector)	Age, gender, and school	Gender	Gender: urban/rural; occupation; ethnicity, age, employed/unemployed
Natural groups?	No, but all participants were mature university students	Some	Yes	Yes	No	Some	Yes, but picked at random by teachers	Most	No



Research in focus 21.1

Focus group in action: AIDS in the Media Research Project

Focus group research on the representation of AIDS in the mass media was part of a larger project on this topic. The focus groups were concerned with the examination of the ways in which 'media messages are explored by audiences and how understandings of AIDS are constructed. We were interested not solely in what people thought but in *how* they thought and *why* they thought as they did' (Kitzinger 1994: 104).

Details of the groups are in Table 21.1. Since one goal of the research was to emphasize the role of interaction in the construction of meaning, it was important to provide a platform for enhancing this feature. Accordingly, 'instead of working with isolated individuals, or collections of individuals drawn together simply for the purposes of the research, we elected to work with pre-existing groups—people who already lived, worked or socialized together' (Kitzinger 1993: 272).

As a result, the groups were made up of such collections of people as a team of civil engineers working on the same site, six members of a retirement club, intravenous drug-users, and so on. The sessions themselves are described as having been 'conducted in a relaxed fashion with minimal intervention from the facilitator—at least at first' (Kitzinger 1994: 106). Each session lasted approximately two hours and was tape-recorded.

Size of groups

How large should groups be? Morgan (1998a) suggests that the typical group size is six to ten members, although the numbers in the groups cited in Table 21.1, which admittedly are not randomly selected and include mainly British studies, imply that this calculation is

slightly high in terms of both the range and the mean. One major problem faced by focus group practitioners is people who agree to participate but who do not turn up on the day. It is almost impossible to control for 'no-shows' other than consciously over-recruiting, a strategy that is sometimes recommended (e.g. S. Wilkinson 1999a: 188).



Tips and skills

Number of focus groups

Focus groups take a long time to arrange, and it takes a long time to transcribe the recordings that are made. It is likely that students will not be able to include as many focus group sessions for projects or dissertations as the studies cited in this chapter. You will, therefore, need to make do with a smaller number of groups in most instances. Make sure you are able to justify the number of groups you have chosen and why your data are still significant.

The question of 'no-shows' aside (which almost certainly accounts for the figures at the low end of the size ranges in Table 21.1), Morgan (1998a) recommends smaller groups when participants are likely to have a lot to say on the research topic. This is likely to occur when participants are very involved in or emotionally preoccupied with the topic. He also suggests smaller groups when topics are controversial or complex and when gleaning participants' personal accounts is a major goal. Morgan (1998a: 75) recommends larger groups when involvement with a topic is likely to be low or when the researcher wants 'to hear numerous brief sugges-

tions'. However, I am not convinced that larger groups are necessarily superior for topics in which participants have little involvement, since it may be more difficult to stimulate discussion in such a context. Larger groups may make it even more difficult if people are rather reticent about talking about a topic about which they know little or have little experience. A topic like media representations of social science research, which most people are unlikely to have much interest in or even to have thought about, could easily have resulted in a wall of silence in large groups (Fenton et al. 1998; see Table 21.1). Barbour (2007) proposes a maximum of eight for most purposes.

She argues that larger groups will be less suited to the interest among most social researchers in participants' interpretations and the ways in which views are constructed in the course of focus group sessions. Also, she suggests that larger groups can be a challenge for moderators in terms of responding to participants' remarks in the course of sessions and also at the analysis stage because of practical difficulties like recognizing the different voices in audio-recordings of the sessions. Peek and Fothergill (2009) provide confirmation of the likelihood that, in many contexts, smaller groups will be preferable (see Research in focus 21.4 for more on this research). They report that those focus groups that included between three and five participants 'ran more smoothly than the larger group interviews that we conducted' (Peek and Fothergill 2009: 37). By contrast, they found that the management of larger focus groups that varied between six and fifteen members was considerably more taxing. In particular, they found it hard to entice more reticent members to speak up. Also, in the smaller groups, there seemed to be greater opportunity for disagreement and diversity of opinion, perhaps because there was less of a tendency for one person to dominate proceedings.

Level of moderator involvement

How involved should the moderator/facilitator be? In qualitative research, the aim is to get at the perspectives

of those being studied. Consequently, the approach should not be intrusive and structured. Therefore, there is a tendency for researchers to use a fairly small number of very general questions to guide the focus group session. Moreover, there is a further tendency for moderators to allow quite a lot of latitude to participants, so that the discussion can range fairly widely. Obviously, if the discussion goes off at a total tangent it may be necessary to refocus the participants' attention, but even then it may be necessary to be careful, because what may appear to be digressions may in fact reveal something of interest to the group participants. The advantage of allowing a fairly free rein to the discussion is that the researcher stands a better chance of getting access to what individuals see as important or interesting. On the other hand, too much totally irrelevant discussion may prove too unproductive, especially in the commercial environment of market research. It is not surprising, therefore, that, as S. Wilkinson (1999a) observes, some writers on focus groups perceive the possibility that participants come to take over the running of a session from the moderator as a problem and offer advice on how to reassert control (e.g. Krueger 1988).

One way in which the moderator may need to be involved is in responding to specific points that are of potential interest to the research questions but that are not picked up by other participants. In the extract in Research in focus 21.2 from the study of the reception of



Research in focus 21.2

Extract from a focus group showing no moderator involvement

In the following extract, three focus group participants engage in a discussion with no intervention or involvement on the part of the moderator. The participants are discussing how people view media reporting of social science research.

- R1 Essentially with the pure sciences I get an end result. Whereas with the social sciences it's pretty vague because it's very, very subjective.
- R2 I suppose for me the pure sciences seem to have more control of what they are looking at because they keep control of more. Because with social sciences there are many different aspects that could have an impact and you can't necessarily control them. So it seems more difficult to pin down and therefore to some extent controversial.
- R3 Pure science is more credible because you've got control over test environments, you've got an ability to test and control factually the outcome and then establish relationships between different agents or whatever. I think in social science it's always subject to interpretation. . . . I think if you want to create an easy life and be unaccountable to anybody, to obtain funding and spend your time in a stress-free way then one of the best things to do is to work in funded research and one of the best areas to do it in is in social science. (Fenton et al. 1998: 127)

media representations of social science research from Fenton et al. (1998), a group of men who have been in higher education and are in private-sector employment begin to talk about the differences between the natural and the social sciences.

It is interesting to see the way in which a consensus about the social sciences is built up in this discussion with a particular emphasis on the lack of control in social research and on the supposed subjectivity of interpretation when compared to the 'pure' sciences. On other

occasions, a little nudge from the moderator may be required when a particularly interesting point is not followed up by other participants. An example of this is provided in Research in focus 21.3, which is from the same research, but this time the focus group is made up of women in private-sector employment and whose education is up to GCSE level. They are talking about a news item reporting research on victims of crime but that includes a number of detailed case studies of individual experiences of being a victim.



Research in focus 21.3

Extract from a focus group showing some moderator involvement

In the following extract, three focus group participants engage in a discussion with only a little intervention or involvement on the part of the moderator. The participants are discussing how people view media reporting of social science research.

R1 That was easy and interesting.

[Moderator] Why interesting? Why easy?

R2 Because it affects all of us.

R1 It was actually reading about what had happened to people. It wasn't all facts and figures. I know it was, but it has in the first sentence, where it says 'I turned the key and experienced a sinking feeling'. You can relate to that straight away. It's how you'd feel.

R3 She's in a flat and she hears noises—it's something that everyone does. Being on their own and they hear a noise. (Fenton et al. 1998: 129)

On this occasion, the moderator's intervention usefully allows the discussion to bring out the kinds of attributes that make for an easy and interesting media item on this topic. In particular, the participants feel that they can appreciate the media representation of social science research when it is something they can relate to and that an important way of doing this is the ability to use people's personal experiences as a lens through which the research can be viewed.

Clearly, the moderator has to straddle two positions: allowing the discussion to flow freely and intervening to bring out especially salient issues, particularly when group participants do not do so. This is not an easy conundrum to resolve, and each tactic—intervention and non-intervention—carries risks. The best advice is to err on the side of minimal intervention—other than to start the group on a fresh set of issues—but to intervene when the group is struggling in its discussions or when it has not alighted on something that is said in the course of the session that appears significant for the research topic.

The role of moderator is not just to do with the asking of questions and ensuring as far as possible that the discussion flows well. It is also to do with controlling events in the discussion. If participants begin to talk at the same time, as often happens when a discussion really 'takes off', it will make the audio-recording of the session impossible to decipher. The moderator has an important role in reminding participants to talk one at a time (see Research in focus 21.7 for an example). Also, it is well known that some participants have a tendency to monopolize discussions and that some participants are very reticent about talking. The moderator can have an important role in encouraging the latter to speak, perhaps by asking whether those who have not said much would like to take the opportunity to contribute.

Selecting participants

Who can participate? Anyone for whom the topic is relevant can logically be an appropriate participant.

Sometimes, certain topics do not require participants of a particular kind, so that there is little if any restriction on who might be appropriate. This is a fairly unusual situation and normally some restriction is required. For example, for their research on the organization of knowledge about heart attacks, Morgan and Spanish (1985: 257) recruited people in the 35–50 age range, since they 'would be likely to have more experience with informal discussions of our chosen topic', but they excluded anyone who had had a heart attack or who was uneasy about discussing the topic.

More often, as Table 21.1 suggests and as previously noted, a wide range of people is required, but they are organized into separate groups in terms of stratifying criteria, such as age, gender, education, occupation, and having or not having had a certain experience. Participants for each group can then be selected randomly or through some kind of snowball sampling method. The aim is to establish whether there is any systematic variation in the ways in which different groups discuss a matter. For example, in his research on the *Nationwide* news programme, Morley (1980) found that groups of managers interpreted the programmes they were shown in ways that were broadly consistent with the intentions of the programme producers, but that groups of trade unionists derived interpretations that were in opposition to those intentions. Such an inference can be derived only when focus group participation has been organized in terms of such stratifying criteria. Similarly, drawing on findings from their research into the responses of women to viewing violence, Schlesinger et al. (1992) derived a similar kind of conclusion. They showed their fourteen groups (see Table 21.1) four items: an episode of *Crimewatch UK* featuring some violence; an episode of *EastEnders* in which violence was incidental; a television drama, *Closing Ranks*, featuring marital violence; and the Hollywood movie *The Accused*, which contains an extremely vivid rape scene. Drawing on their findings concerning the groups' responses to these showings, the authors concluded:

in general, the salience in any particular programme of ethnicity, class, or gender or a lived experience such as violence is greatest for those *most directly involved* and diminishes in importance with social distance. Having a particular experience or a particular background does significantly affect the interpretation of a given text. The four programmes screened are obviously open to various readings. However, on the evidence, *how* they are read is fundamentally affected by various socio-cultural factors and by lived experience. (Schlesinger et al. 1992: 168; emphases in original)

A slight variation on this approach can be seen in Kitzing's (1994) study of reactions to media representations of AIDS (see Research in focus 21.1 and Table 21.1). Her groups were made up of people in a variety of different situations. Some of these were what she calls 'general population groups' (for example, a team of civil engineers working on the same site), but others were made up of groups that might have a special interest in AIDS (for example, male prostitutes, intravenous drug users). However, the general point is that increasingly focus group practitioners try to discern patterns of variation by putting together groups with particular attributes or clusters of attributes.

A further issue in relation to the selection of group participants is whether to select people who are unknown to each other or to use natural groupings (for example, friends, co-workers, students on the same course). Some researchers prefer to exclude people who know each other on the grounds that pre-existing styles of interaction or status differences may contaminate the session. Not all writers accept this rule of thumb. Some prefer to select natural groups whenever possible. Kitzing (1994; Research in focus 21.1 and Table 21.1) used groups made up of people who knew each other. The reason was that she wanted the discussions to be as natural as possible, and she felt that this quality would be enhanced through the use of members of what she calls 'pre-existing groups'. Holbrook and Jackson (1996) report that, for their research on shopping centres, they initially tried to secure participants who did not know each other, but this strategy did not result in anybody coming forward. They then sought out participants from various clubs and social centres in the vicinity of the two North London shopping centres in which they were interested. They argue that, in view of their interest in research questions concerning shopping in relation to the construction of identity and how it relates to people's sense of place, recruiting people who knew each other was a highly appropriate strategy.

However, opting for a strategy of recruiting people entirely from natural groups is not always feasible, because of difficulties of securing participation. Fenton et al. (1998: 121), in the context of their research on the representation of social science research (Table 21.1), report that they preferred to recruit 'naturally occurring groups' but that 'this was not always achievable'. Morgan (1998a) suggests that one problem with using natural groups is that people who know each other well are likely to operate with taken-for-granted assumptions that they feel do not need to be brought to the fore. He suggests that, if it is important for the researcher to bring out such assumptions, groups of strangers are likely to work better.



Research in focus 21.4

Recruiting focus group participants

Peek and Fothergill (2009) have outlined the strategies they used in recruiting participants for focus groups studies in three North American contexts: with parents, children, and teachers in two urban day-care centres; with Muslim Americans following 9/11; and experiences of children and young people after the Hurricane Katrina flooding of New Orleans. They used three approaches:

- What they call *researcher-driven recruitment*, whereby the researcher with the support of an organization with an interest in the research uses email, letters, flyers, and telephone calls to solicit interest in participation.
- *Key informant recruitment*, which entails stakeholder organizations actively assisting in the recruitment of participants. For example, in the Hurricane Katrina study, a schoolteacher smoothed the path for the researchers to make contact with 'middle school students'.
- *Spontaneous recruitment*, which arises when individuals volunteer to participate having heard about the research through others. An example is when people see someone being interviewed and ask to join in.

Similar strategies seem to have been at work in the focus groups that formed part of the CCSE research on cultural tastes and activities (Research in focus 2.9, 21.6, and 21.7). The authors write that 'group formation involved a variety of processes of access negotiation, via community groups, businesses, professional organisations, and drew on established personal and professional networks' (Silva and Wright 2005: 3). For example, to recruit the Pakistani groups, a community centre was approached, and, to secure working-class pensioners, a church acted as a source. At the same time, relevant businesses were approached for employment- or work-related groups.

Asking questions

An issue that is close to the question of the degree of involvement on the part of the moderator is the matter of how far there should be a set of questions that must be addressed. This issue is very similar to the considerations about how unstructured an interview should be in qualitative interviewing (see Chapter 20). Some researchers prefer to use just one or two very general questions to stimulate discussion, with the moderator intervening as necessary along the lines outlined above. For example, in their research on knowledge about heart attacks, Morgan and Spanish (1985) asked participants to discuss just two topics. One topic was 'who has heart attacks and why?'; here participants were encouraged to talk about people they knew who had had attacks. The second topic was 'what causes and what prevents heart attacks?'

However, other researchers prefer to inject somewhat more structure into the organization of the focus group sessions. An example of this is the research on the viewing of violence by women by Schlesinger et al. (1992; see Table 21.1). For example, in relation to the movie *The Accused*, the reactions of the audiences were gleaned through 'guiding questions' under five main headings, the first three of which had several more specific elements.

- Initially, the participants were given the opportunity to discuss the film in terms of such issues as: perceived purpose of the film; gratifications from the film; and realism and storyline.
- The questioning then moved on to reactions to the characters such as: Sarah Tobias (the woman who is raped); the three rapists; the female lawyer; and the male lawyers.
- Participants were then asked about their reactions to scenes, such as: the rape; the female lawyer's decision to change from not supporting Sarah Tobias's case to supporting it; and the winning of the case.
- Participants were asked about their reactions to the inclusion of the rape scene.
- Finally, they were asked about how they perceived the film's value, in particular whether the fact that it is American made a difference to their reactions.

While the research by Schlesinger et al. (1992) clearly contained quite a lot of specific questions to be addressed, the questions themselves were fairly general and were designed to ensure that there was some comparability between the focus group sessions in terms of gauging participants' reactions to each of the four programmes that were shown. Moreover, there was ample opportunity

for moderators to react to points made in the course of the sessions. The authors write that 'due allowance was made for specific issues raised within a given group' (Schlesinger et al. 1992: 28). Moreover, the early questions were designed to generate initial reactions in a relatively open-ended way. Such a general approach to questioning, which is fairly common in focus group research, allows the researcher to navigate the channel between, on the one side, addressing the research questions and ensuring comparability between sessions, and, on the other side, allowing participants to raise issues they see as significant and in their own terms.

Clearly, there are different questioning strategies and approaches to moderating focus group sessions. Most seem to approximate to the research by Fenton et al. described in Research in focus 21.3, which lies in between the rather open-ended approach employed by Morgan and Spanish (1985) and the somewhat more structured one used by Schlesinger et al. (1992). Similarly, Macnaghten and Jacobs (1997; see Table 21.1) employed a 'topic guide' and grouped the topics to be covered into areas of discussion. Their middle-of-the-road approach in terms of the degree to which the questioning was structured can be seen in the following passage, in which a group of working women reveal a cynicism about governments and experts regarding the reality of environmental problems, a tendency that could also be seen in most of the other groups, which similarly preferred to rely on their own sensory experience (in this passage 'F' is 'female'):

- F* They only tell us what they want us to know. And that's just the end of that, so we are left with a fog in your brain, so you just think—what have I to worry about? I don't know what they're on about.
- Mod* So why do Government only tell us what they want us to hear?
- F* To keep your confidence going. (All together)
- Mod* So if someone provides an indicator which says the economy is improving you won't believe it?
- F* They've been saying it for about ten years, but where? I can't see anything!
- F* Every time there's an election they say the economy is improving. (Macnaghten and Jacobs 1997: 18)

In this passage, we see an emphasis on the topic to be addressed but a capacity to pick up on what the group says. A rather structured approach to focus group questioning was used in a cross-national study of young Europeans' 'orientations to the present and future, with respect to their "careers" as partners, parents and workers' (Smithson and Brannen 2002: 14). The countries involved were Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and the UK. Three hundred and twelve people participated in the research, but the number of groups and the number of participants in them varied considerably by country. The somewhat more structured approach to questioning can be seen in the fact that there were nineteen topic areas, each of which had several questions. For example, for the topic of 'jobs':

- What do you want from a job?
- What is important when you look for a job?
- Do you think it is important to support yourself?
- How do you expect to do that (job/state/spouse/other way)?
- Do you think it is different for women and men of your age?
- Do you expect to be in paid employment in five years' time/ten years' time? (Brannen et al. 2002: 190)

The more structured approach to questioning that seems to have occurred with these groups may have been the result of the demands of ensuring comparability between the sessions conducted in the different nations.

There is probably no one best way, and the style of questioning and moderating is likely to be affected by various factors, such as the nature of the research topic (for example, is it one that the researcher already knows a lot about, in which case a modicum of structure is feasible) and levels of interest and/or knowledge among participants in the research (for example, a low level of participant interest may require a somewhat more structured approach). The sensitivity of the topic may be a further consideration where several open-ended questions may be needed to act as 'ice breakers' (see Research in focus 21.5). Whichever strategy of questioning is employed, the focus group researcher should generally be prepared to allow at least some discussion that departs from the interview guide, since such debate may provide new and unexpected insights. A more structured approach to questioning might inhibit such spontaneity, but it is unlikely to remove it altogether.



Research in focus 21.5

Questioning in a focus group

Warr's (2005) study was concerned with notions of intimacy among predominantly socio-economically disadvantaged people in New Zealand. Most of her participants were aged between 18 and 29 years. Her questioning strategy was to begin with what she calls an 'icebreaker', which entailed asking participants about a popular movie that was on release at the time. Such an opening can be useful in stimulating initial thoughts on issues of intimacy, given the frequency with which relationships are emphasized in movies. This icebreaker was followed by the following questions:

'How do you know when you've in love?' 'How do you know when someone is in love with you?' 'In getting to know people, who makes the first move?' and 'How do you learn about sex and love?' To conclude, I would request participants to imagine the future in terms of whether they expected to settle down with someone, get married, or have children. The theme list posed very broad questions for discussion so there was plenty of scope for participants to pursue the topics in undirected ways and to introduce other issues as required. (Warr 2005: 156)

This approach clearly entailed using broad questions or topics as a means of stimulating discussion.

Beginning and finishing

It is recommended that focus group sessions begin with an introduction, whereby the moderators thank people for coming and introduce themselves, the goals of the research are briefly outlined, the reasons for recording the session are given, and the format of the focus group session is sketched out. It is also important to present some of the conventions of focus group participation, such as: only one person should speak at a time (perhaps explaining the problems that occur with recordings when people speak over each other); that all data will be treated confidentially and anonymized; that the session is open, and everyone's views are important; and

the amount of time that will be taken up. During the introduction phase, focus group researchers also often ask participants to fill in forms providing basic socio-demographic information about themselves, such as age, gender, occupation, and where resident. Participants should then be encouraged to introduce themselves and to write out their first names on a card placed in front of them, so that everyone's name is known.

At the end, moderators should thank the group members for their participation and explain very briefly what will happen to the data they have supplied. If a further session is to be arranged, steps should be taken to coordinate this.



Group interaction in focus group sessions

Kitzinger (1994) has observed that reports of focus group research frequently do not take into account interaction within the group. This is surprising, because it is precisely the operation of social interaction and its forms and impact that would seem to distinguish the focus group session from the individual interview. Yet, as Kitzinger observes, very few publications based on focus group research cite or draw inferences from patterns of interaction within the group. Wilkinson reviewed

over 200 studies based on focus groups and published between 1946 and 1996. She concluded: 'Focus group data is most commonly presented as if it were one-to-one interview data, with interactions between group participants rarely reported, let alone analysed' (S. Wilkinson 1998: 112).

In the context of her research on AIDS in the mass media, Kitzinger (1994) drew attention to two types of interaction in focus groups: complementary and

argumentative interactions. The former bring out the elements of the social world that provide participants' own frameworks of understanding. The discussion in Research in focus 21.2 brings out the agreement that emerges about the differences between the natural and the social sciences in people's minds. The discussion demonstrates broad agreement between the participants concerning such issues as the lack of control and the subjective nature of interpretation. Such a view is an emergent product of the interaction, with each participant building on the preceding remark. A similar sequence can be discerned in the following passage, which is taken from Morgan and Spanish's (1985: 414) research on heart attack victims:

No. 1 But I think maybe what we're saying here is that there's no one cause of heart attacks, there's no one type of person, there's probably umpteen different types of heart attacks and causes coming from maybe smoking, maybe obesity, maybe stress, maybe design fault, hereditary, overwork, change in life style. Any of these things in themselves could be . . .

No. 2 And when you start putting them in combination [unclear] be speeding up on yourself.

No. 3 Yeah, you may be really magnifying each one of these particular things.

No. 2 Yeah, and depending on how, and in each person that magnification is different. Some people can take a little stress without doing any damage, some people can take a little smoking, a little drinking, a little obesity, without doing any damage. But you take a little of each of these and put them together and you're starting to increase the chances of damage. And any one of these that takes a magnitude leap increases the chances.

This sequence from the transcript helpfully brings out the consensus that emerges around the question of who has heart attacks and why. No. 1 summarizes several factors that have been discussed; No. 2 then introduces the possible significance of some of these factors existing in combination; No. 3 agrees about the importance of combinations of factors; and No. 2 summarizes the position of the group on the salience of combinations of factors, raising at the same time the possibility that for each person there are unique combinations of factors that may be responsible for heart attacks.

Munday (2006) suggests that the capacity of focus group research to bring out the emergence of a consensus as well as the mechanics of that consensus makes it a potent tool for research into collective identity. She gives the example of her research on social movements and in particular a focus group with members of a Women's Institute (WI). For example, she asked the group about the movie *Calendar Girls*, based on the nude calendar made by Rylestone WI members some years previously. Munday writes that she asked the question because she felt it might encourage them to discuss the traditional image of WIs as staid and stuffy. Instead, the women chose to discuss the Rylestone WI and its members, such as the impact that the calendar's notoriety had on its members. At a later stage, the following interaction ensued:

Alice It might appeal more to the younger ones than perhaps the older members don't you think? . . . Although I suppose they were middle-aged ladies themselves.

Jane Oh yes.

Mar Oh yes they were yes.

Jane They weren't slim and what have you.

Mary Oh no no.

Jane ()

Mary No they were quite well . . .

Jane They were.

Mary Weren't they?

June I mean it was very well done because you never saw anything you wouldn't want to. (Munday 2006: 100)

Munday argues that the discussion of the movie did not revolve around dispelling the traditional image of WIs, but instead on dispelling a traditional image of older women, while at the same time recognizing that the women's respectability was not compromised. Thus, a sense of collective identity surrounding gender emerged that was somewhat different from how the researcher had anticipated the discussion would develop.

However, as Kitzinger (1994) suggests, arguments in focus groups can be equally revealing. She suggests that moderators can play an important role in identifying differences of opinion and exploring with participants the factors that may lie behind them. Disagreement can provide participants with the opportunity to revise their

opinions or to think more about the reasons why they hold the view that they do. By way of illustration, a passage from Schlesinger et al. (1992; see Table 21.1) is presented. The group is made up of English Afro-Caribbean women with no experience of violence. The debate is concerned with the rape scene in *The Accused* and reveals a misgiving that its inclusion may actually be exploiting sexual violence:

- Speaker 1* I think . . . that they could've explained it. They could easily leave that rape scene.
- Speaker 2* But it's like that other film we watched. You don't realise the full impact, like, the one we were watching, the first one [*Crimewatch*], until you've got the reconstruction.
- Speaker 3* Yeah, but I think with that sort of film, it would cause more damage than it would good, I mean, if someone had been raped, would you like to have [to] sit through that again? (Schlesinger et al. 1992: 151–2)

The debate then continues to consider the significance of the scene for men:

- Speaker 1* But you wouldn't miss anything, would you? What would you? All right, if you didn't watch that particular part, would you miss anything? You could still grasp it couldn't you?
- Speaker 2* You could still grasp it but the enormous effect that it's had on us at the moment, it wouldn't be as drastic . . . without those.
- Speaker 1* Yeah, but I'm thinking how would men see it? . . .
- Speaker 3* That's what I'm saying, how would they view that scene?
- Speaker 4* They couldn't believe it either, I mean, they didn't—they didn't think they were doing any wrong.
- Speaker 1* Men would sit down and think, 'Well, she asked for it. She was enjoying it and look, the men around enjoyed it.' (Schlesinger et al. 1992: 152)

One factor, then, that seems to be behind the unease of some of the women about the inclusion of the vivid rape

scene is that it may be enjoyed by men, rather than being found repulsive, and that they would identify with the onlookers in the film. This account has come about because of the discussion that is stimulated by disagreement within the group and allows a rounded account of women's reactions to the scene to be forged. As Kitzinger (1994) argues, drawing attention to patterns of interaction within focus groups allows the researcher to determine how group participants view the issues with which they are confronted in their own terms. The posing of questions by and agreement and disagreement among participants helps to bring out their own stances on these issues. The resolution of disagreements also helps to force participants to express the grounds on which they hold particular views.

As Warr's (2005) research on intimacy found, focus groups frequently reveal a mixture of agreement and disagreement among participants (see Table 21.1 and Research in focus 21.5 for more on this research as well as Research in focus 21.6 for an example of a disagreement in a focus group). This feature allows the researcher to draw out the tensions associated with people's private beliefs in relation to wider public debates and expectations. This was of particular significance for Warr's interest in intimacy, because of the difficulties involved in resolving disagreements about what is and is not appropriate in matters of love and sex. Warr argues that focusing on areas of agreement and disagreement in focus groups can be a useful starting point for the interpretation and analysis of the qualitative data that derive from them.

While interaction and disagreements represent distinctive features of the focus group compared to individual interviews in qualitative research, it is also the case that they add a layer of complexity to the analysis of the ensuing qualitative data. Most of the principles and approaches that will be identified in Chapter 24 can and should be usefully followed. In addition, Barbour (2007) recommends seeking out patterns within focus group data—for example, showing how particular interpretations are associated with individuals in different positions or with certain social characteristics. This might involve seeking out intra-group or inter-group patterns, depending on whether each group is made up of similar individuals or different ones or a mixture of both.

Morgan (2010) has argued that focus group data that emphasize group interaction are not necessarily superior to those that do not. This is clearly a different position from that proposed by Kitzinger (1994). He argues that it all depends on what the researcher wishes to demonstrate. Sometimes, quoting what individuals have said



Research in focus 21.6

Disagreement in a focus group

In the following extract, three focus group participants engage in a discussion with no intervention or involvement on the part of the moderator, David, after his initial question. The participants are discussing Tupac Shakur, a rap singer.

- David* Who would be more kind of modern artists you would listen to . . . ?
- Yousuf* Tupac. Tupac Shakur. I'm not into that Hindi or nothing. R&B and Hip Hop unless you recommend to me it like to me it's Tupac.
- Moin* I think Tupac, the way he sings his songs and jumps around is a thug and I don't really appreciate him.
- Kamran* Who?
- Moin* Tupac Shakur, Machiavelli he calls himself. You see a lot of women jumping up and down, flashy cars, he is singing about his life experience, no that doesn't do anything for me. I would rather listen to some Bollywood songs. (Silva and Wright 2005: 10)

On the face of it, this exchange from a focus group of Pakistani working-class participants may seem unexceptional, but Silva and Wright report that Yousuf played very little further part in the session after the suggestion that he proffered had been undermined by Moin and to some extent by Kamran claiming not to have heard of Tupac. This is one of the risks of focus groups—namely, that, although they can capitalize on diversity of perspectives, sometimes disagreement may be difficult to deal with and may be offputting to some participants. Should the moderator, David, have intervened to quell the disagreement? Probably not: disagreements about taste are common in everyday life, and he could not really have anticipated Yousuf's unusual response.

can be more effective than passages of interaction, if what the researcher wants to show is an often repeated position. Quoting sequences of interaction might be less effective in making the point and also uses up far more words, which may be a consideration when there is a tight word limit. One situation that he refers to as almost

always warranting emphasizing interaction is when a new topic is introduced and this very rapidly stimulates a series of responses from a variety of focus group participants. The emerging consensus or dispute in this situation is clearly very significant to participants and warrants being quoted in detail.



Limitations of focus groups

Focus groups clearly have considerable potential for research questions in which the processes through which meaning is jointly constructed is likely to be of particular interest. Indeed, it may be that, even when this is not a prominent emphasis, the use of the focus group method may be appropriate and even advantageous, since it allows participants' perspectives—an important feature

of much qualitative research (see Chapter 17)—to be revealed in ways that are different from individual interviews (for example, through discussion, participants' questions, arguments, and so on). It also offers considerable potential for feminist researchers. What, then, might be its chief limitations?



Student experience

The challenges of focus groups

For her research around the topic of childhood obesity with mothers of young children, Samantha Vandermark conducted two focus groups of six people per group. She clearly found moderating the groups challenging:

Organisation of the focus groups was a primary difficulty, not only in terms of getting the right demographic for my samples but getting all of the mothers in one place at one time to conduct the focus group. My skills as an interviewer and moderator were tested as the mothers often tended to lose focus on the questions and shift conversation onto broader topics; I had to ensure that I used my initiative to adapt the questions according to the flow of conversation, keeping the questions relevant and the respondents interested.

This experience demonstrates that it is important to remain very active in a focus group session so that you do not lose control over the proceedings.



To read more about Samantha's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

- The researcher probably has less control over proceedings than with the individual interview. As we have seen, by no means all writers on focus groups perceive this as a disadvantage, and indeed feminist researchers often see it as an advantage. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) note that there is a tradition among some focus group researchers to value the method because it provides greater opportunity than most other methods for research participants to have some 'ownership' of the interview and the research process more generally. However, the question of control raises issues for researchers of how far they can allow a focus group to 'take over' the running of proceedings. There is clearly a delicate balance to be taken into account over how involved moderators should be and how far a set of prompts or questions should influence the conduct of a focus group, as some of the earlier discussions have suggested. What is not clear is the degree to which it is appropriate to surrender control of a focus group to its participants, especially when there is a reasonably explicit set of research questions to be answered, as is commonly the case, for example, in funded research.
- The data are difficult to analyse. A huge amount of data can be very quickly produced. Developing a strategy of analysis that incorporates both themes in what people say and patterns of interaction is not easy. Also, as previously pointed out, focus group recordings are particularly prone to inaudible elements, which affects transcription. However, studies like those of Morgan and Spanish (1985) and Kitzinger (1994) demonstrate that the examination of group interaction can be used to show how issues of the thematic interest arise in the course of discussion.
- They are difficult to organize. Not only do you have to secure the agreement of people to participate in your study; you also need to persuade them to turn up at a particular time. Small payments, such as book or store tokens, are sometimes made to induce participation, but nonetheless it is common for people not to turn up. As a result, it is a common practice in focus group circles to over-recruit for each session on the grounds that at least one or two people will not turn up.
- The recordings are probably more time-consuming to transcribe than equivalent recordings of individual interviews, because of variations in voice pitch and the need to take account of who says what. For example, Bloor et al. (2001) suggest that a focus group session lasting one hour can take up to eight hours to transcribe, which is somewhat longer than would be likely in connection with an equivalent personal interview.
- There are problems with focus groups that are not encountered in individual interviews, most notably the tendency for two or more participants to speak at the same time. It is usually very difficult and often impossible to make sense of and therefore transcribe the portions of recordings where this has occurred. Of course, moderators can ask participants not to speak at the same time, but in my experience it is difficult to prevent this from occurring in spite of constant warnings (see Research in focus 21.7 for an example).
- There are possible problems of group effects. This includes the obvious problem of dealing with reticent



Research in focus 21.7

Speaking at the same time in a focus group

Like Research in focus 21.6, this extract is taken from one of the twenty-five focus groups that were part of the CCSE project (see Research in focus 2.9). This is a group of unskilled and semi-skilled workers discussing museum visiting:

[All talking at once]

Stephanie Please, please, I know I'm being like a schoolteacher . . .

Bill No, no, we're all ears 'Miss'!

[General laughter]

Stephanie Will you all shut up!

Tel I don't think I would go to the [museum] in Swansea because it wouldn't be as good as the one in London. And please 'Miss' I need to piss.

Stephanie All right then but no running in the corridors and make sure you wash your hands afterwards.

[General laughter] (Silva and Wright 2005: 7)

The moderator, Stephanie, has clearly had problems stopping this group talking at the same time. She very cleverly turns it into a joke by likening herself to a schoolteacher, even telling them to shut up. The group seems to enter into the spirit of the joke but whether she was able to stop participants from talking over each other, thereby making audio-recording more or less impossible, is another question.

speakers and with those who hog the stage! In this respect, they are a bit like tutorials. Krueger (1998: 59) suggests in relation to the problem of overly prominent participants that the moderator should make clear to the speaker and other group participants that other people's views are definitely required; for example, he suggests saying something like 'That's one point of view. Does anyone have another point of view?' As for those who do not speak very much, it is recommended that they are actively encouraged to say something. Also, as the well-known Asch experiments showed, an emerging group view may mean that a perfectly legitimate perspective held by just one individual may be suppressed (Asch 1951). There is also evidence that, as a group comes to share a certain point of view, group members come to think uncritically about it and to develop almost irrational attachments to it (Janis 1982). It is not known how far such group effects have an adverse impact on focus group findings, but it is clear that they cannot be entirely ignored. In this context, it would be interesting to know how far agreement among focus group participants is more frequently encountered than disagreement (I have a hunch that it is), since the effects to which both Asch and Janis referred would lead us to expect more agreement than disagreement in focus group discussions.

- Related to this last issue is the fact that, in group contexts, participants may be more prone to expressing culturally expected views than in individual interviews. Morgan (2002) cites the case of a study in which group interviews with boys discussing relationships with girls were compared with individual interviews with them on the same topic. In the latter they expressed a degree of sensitivity that was not present in the group context, where more macho views tended to be forthcoming. This suggests that, in the group interviews, the boys were seeking to impress others and were being influenced by the norms of their peer group. However, this does not render the group interview data questionable, because it may be precisely the gulf between privately and publicly held views that is of interest.
- Madriz (2000) proposes that there are circumstances when focus groups may not be appropriate, because of their potential for causing discomfort among participants. When such discomfort might arise, individual interviews are likely to be preferable. Situations in which unease might be occasioned are: when intimate details of private lives need to be revealed; when participants may not be comfortable in each other's presence (for example, bringing together people in a hierarchical relationship to each other); and when participants are likely to disagree profoundly with each other.



Checklist

Issues to consider for your focus group

- ☐ Have you devised a clear and comprehensive way of introducing the research to participants?
- ☐ Do the questions or topics you have devised allow you to answer all your research questions?
- ☐ Have you piloted the guide with some appropriate respondents?
- ☐ Have you devised a strategy for encouraging respondents to turn up for the focus group meeting?
- ☐ Have you thought about what you will do if some participants do not turn up for the session?
- ☐ Have you ensured that sessions will allow novel or unexpected themes and issues to arise?
- ☐ Is your language in the questions clear and comprehensible?
- ☐ Are your questions relevant to the people who are participating in the focus groups?
- ☐ Have your questions been designed to elicit reflective discussions so that participants are not tempted to answer in 'yes' or 'no' terms?
- ☐ Have your questions been designed to encourage group interaction and discussion?
- ☐ Do your questions offer a real prospect of seeing the world from your interviewees' point of view rather than imposing your own frame of reference on them?
- ☐ Are you familiar with the setting(s) in which the session will take place?
- ☐ Are you thoroughly familiar with and have you tested your recording or audio-visual equipment?
- ☐ Have you thought about how you will present yourself in the session, such as how you will be dressed?
- ☐ Have you devised a strategy for dealing with silences?
- ☐ Have you devised a strategy for dealing with participants who are reluctant to speak?
- ☐ Have you devised a strategy for dealing with participants who speak too much and hog the discussion?
- ☐ Do you have a strategy for how far you are going to intervene in the focus group discussion?
- ☐ Do you have a strategy for dealing with the focus group if the discussion goes off in a tangent?
- ☐ Have you tested out any aids that you are going to present to focus group participants (for example, visual aids, segments of film, case studies)?



Key points

- The focus group is a group interview that is concerned with exploring a certain topic.
- The moderator generally tries to provide a relatively free rein to the discussion. However, there may be contexts in which it is necessary to ask fairly specific questions, especially when cross-group comparability is an issue.
- There is concern with the joint production of meaning among focus group participants.
- Focus group discussions need to be recorded and transcribed.
- There are several issues concerning the recruitment of focus group participants—in particular, whether to use natural groupings and whether to employ stratifying criteria.

- Group interaction is an important component of discussions.
- Some writers view focus groups as well suited to a feminist standpoint.



Questions for review

- Why might it be useful to distinguish between a focus group and a group interview?

Uses of focus groups

- What advantages might the focus group method offer in contrast to an individual qualitative interview?
- Evaluate the argument that the focus group can be viewed as a feminist method.

Conducting focus groups

- How involved should the moderator be?
- Why is it necessary to record and transcribe focus group sessions?
- Are there any circumstances in which it might be a good idea to select participants who know each other?
- What might be the advantages and disadvantages of using an interview guide in focus group sessions?

Group interaction in focus group sessions

- Why might it be important to treat group interaction as an important issue when analysing focus group data?

Limitations of focus groups

- Does the potential for the loss of control over proceedings and for group effects damage the potential utility of the focus group as a method?
 - How far do the greater problems of transcription and difficulty of analysis undermine the potential of focus groups?
 - To what extent are focus groups a naturalistic approach to data collection?
-



Online Resource Centre

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

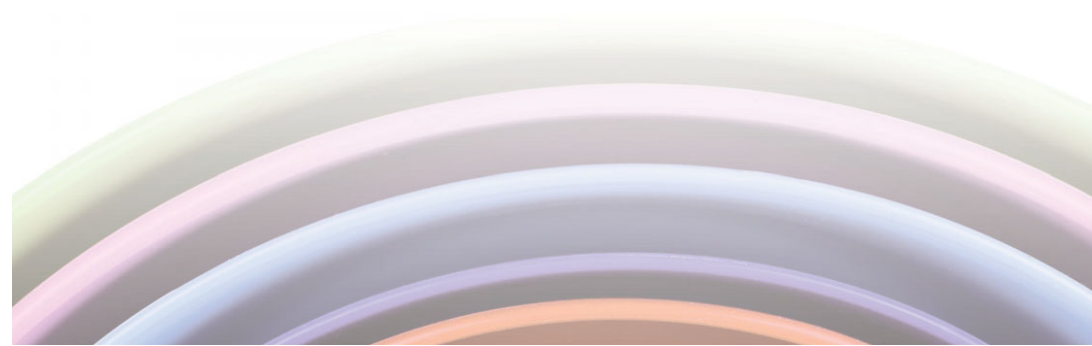
Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of focus groups. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.

22

Language in qualitative research

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Chapter guide

This chapter is concerned with two approaches to the examination of language: conversation analysis and discourse analysis. For the practitioners of both approaches, language is an object of interest in its own right and not simply a resource through which research participants communicate with researchers. The chapter explores:

- the roots of conversation analysis in ethnomethodology;
- some of its rules and principles;
- the assumptions of discourse analysis;
- some of its analytic strategies;
- points of difference between the two approaches.

Introduction

Language is bound to be of importance for social researchers. It is, after all, through language that we ask people questions in interviews and through which the questions are answered. Understanding language categories has been an important component of research involving participant observation, because knowing how words are used and the meanings of specific terms in the local vernacular (often called 'argot') is frequently viewed as crucial to an appreciation of how the social world being studied is viewed by its members.

In this chapter, however, two approaches will be examined that treat language as their central focal points. They are called **conversation analysis** (CA) and **discourse analysis** (DA). What is crucial about these

approaches is that, unlike traditional views of the role of language in social research, they treat language as a topic rather than as a resource (admittedly a clichéd phrase). This means that language is treated as significantly more than a medium through which the business of social research is conducted (such as asking questions in interviews). It becomes a focus of attention in its own right. While CA and DA do not exhaust the range of possibilities for studying language as a topic, they do represent two of the most prominent approaches. Each has developed a technical vocabulary and set of techniques. This chapter will outline some of the basic elements of each of them and draw attention to some contrasting features.



Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) is the fine-grained analysis of talk as it occurs in interaction in naturally occurring situations. The talk is recorded and transcribed so that the detailed analyses can be carried out. These analyses are concerned with uncovering the underlying structures of talk in interaction and as such with the achievement of order through interaction. The roots of CA lie in **ethnomethodology**, a sociological position developed in the USA under the general tutelage of Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks, though it is the latter with whom CA is most associated. Ethnomethodology takes as its basic

focus of attention 'practical, common-sense reasoning' in everyday life and as such is fundamentally concerned with the notion of social life as an accomplishment. Social order is seen not as a pre-existing force constraining individual action, but as something that is worked at and accomplished through interaction. Contrary to what its name implies, ethnomethodology is *not* a research methodology; it is the study of the methods employed in everyday life through which social order is accomplished. As Garfinkel (1967: p. vii) put it in his inimitable style:

in contrast to certain versions of Durkheim that teach that the objective reality of social facts is sociology's fundamental principle, the lesson is taken instead, and used as a study policy, that the objective reality of social facts as an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life, with the ordinary, artful ways of that accomplishment being by members known, used, and taken for granted, is, for members doing sociology, a fundamental phenomenon.

Two ideas are particularly central to ethnomethodology and find clear expression in CA: indexicality and reflexivity. The former means that the meaning of an act, which in CA essentially means spoken words or utterances including pauses and sounds, depends upon the context in which it is used. Reflexivity means that spoken words are constitutive of the social world in which they are located; in other words, the principle of reflexivity in ethnomethodology means that talk is not a 'mere' representation of the social world, so that it does much more than just stand for something else. In these ways, ethnomethodology fits fairly squarely with two aspects of qualitative research—the predilection for a contextual understanding of action (see Chapter 17) and an ontological position associated with constructionism (see Chapter 2).

In the years following its initial introduction into sociology, ethnomethodological research split into two camps. One entailed drawing on traditional social research methods, albeit in perhaps a somewhat altered form, and on ethnography in particular (e.g. Cicourel 1968). The other, which is mainly associated with Sacks and his co-workers (e.g. Sacks et al. 1974), sought to conduct fine-grained analyses of talk in naturally occurring situations. Moreover, it is not just talk in itself that is the object of interest but talk as it occurs in and through social interaction. CA concerns itself with the organization of such talk in the context of interaction. In order to conduct such investigations, a premium was placed on the recording of naturally occurring conversations and their transcription for the purpose of intensive analysis of the sequences of interaction revealed in the subsequent transcripts. As such, CA is a multifaceted approach—part theory, part method of data acquisition, part method of analysis. The predilection for the analysis of talk gleaned from naturally occurring situations suggests that CA chimes with another preoccupation among qualitative researchers—namely, a commitment to naturalism (see Key concept 3.4).

As the above definition and discussion of CA suggest, CA takes from ethnomethodology a concern with the production of social order through and in the course of social interaction but takes conversation as the basic form through which that social order is achieved. The element of indexicality is also evident, in that practitioners of CA argue that the meaning of words is contextually grounded, while the commitment to reflexivity is revealed in the view that talk is constitutive of the social context in which it occurs.

Conversation analysts have developed a variety of procedures for the study of talk in interaction. Psathas (1995: 1) has described them as 'rigorous, systematic procedures' that can 'provide reproducible results'. Such a framework smacks of the commitment to the codification of procedures that generate valid, reliable, and replicable findings that are a feature of quantitative research. It is not surprising, therefore, that CA is sometimes described as having a positivist orientation. Thus, a cluster of features that are broadly in tune with qualitative research (contextual, naturalistic, studying the social world in its own terms and without prior theoretical commitments) are married to traits that are resonant of quantitative research. However, the emphasis on context in CA is somewhat at variance with the way in which contextual understanding is normally conceptualized in qualitative research. For CA practitioners, context refers to the specific here-and-now context of immediately preceding talk, whereas for most qualitative researchers it has a much wider set of resonances, which has to do with an appreciation of such things as the culture of the group within which action occurs. In other words, for most qualitative researchers action is to be understood in terms of the values, beliefs, and typical modes of behaviour of that group. This is precisely the kind of attribution from which CA practitioners are keen to refrain. It is no wonder, therefore, that writers like Silverman (1993) find it difficult to fit CA into broad descriptions of the nature of qualitative research.

Assumptions of conversation analysis

An initial route into CA often begins with the analyst noticing something significant in or striking about the way that a speaker says something. This recognition then generates an emphasis on what that turn of phrase or whatever might be 'doing'—that is, what functions it serves. Clayman and Gill (2004) give the example, which was first noticed by Harvey Sacks, of the way in which children often begin a question by saying 'You know what, daddy [or whoever]?' when among adults. Their

question invariably produces the reply 'What?' and thereby allows the child to find a slot in a sequence of conversation or to inaugurate such a sequence. The use of this strategy reflects children's desire to insinuate themselves in conversations as legitimate participants

and indeed to be able to initiate sequences of the talk.

Once such a focus has been identified, conversation analysts typically follow certain basic assumptions. Heritage (1984, 1987) has proposed three such assumptions:



Research in focus 22.1

Conversation analysis in action showing a question and answer adjacency pair

Silverman (1994: 72) provides the following extract from a conversation between an HIV counsellor (C) at a clinic and a patient (P) (note that this extract includes notation, which is explained in the section on 'Transcription and attention to detail' below):

1. C Can I just briefly ask why: you thought about having
2. an HIV test done:
3. P .hh We:ll I mean it's something that you have these
4. I mean that you have to think about these da: ys, and
5. I just uh: m felt (0.8) you—you have had sex with
6. several people and you just don't want to go on (.)
7. not knowing.



Tips and skills

Basic notational symbols in Conversation Analysis

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| .hh | h's preceded by a dot indicate an intake of breath. If no dot is present, it means breathing out. |
| We:ll | A colon indicates that the sound that occurs directly before the colon is prolonged. More than one colon means further prolongation (e.g. ::::). |
| (0.8) | A figure in parentheses indicates the length of a period of silence, usually measured in tenths of one second. Thus, (0.8) signals eight-tenths of a second of silence. |
| <u>you</u> and <u>k</u> nowing | An underline indicates an emphasis in the speaker's talk. |
| (.) | Indicates a very slight pause. |
| ↑↓ | Indicates a change of pitch in an upwards (↑) or downwards (↓) direction. |

A full list of CA notation can be found at:

www.liso.ucsb.edu/Jefferson/Transcript.pdf (accessed 27 January 2011).

1. *Talk is structured.* Talk comprises invariant patterns—that is, it is structured. Participants are implicitly aware of the rules that underpin these patterns. As a result, conversation analysts eschew attempts to infer the motivations of speakers from what they say or to

ascribe their talk to personal characteristics. Such information is unnecessary, since the conversation analyst is oriented to the underlying structures of action, as revealed in talk.

2. *Talk is forged contextually.* Action is revealed in talk and as such talk must be analysed in terms of its context. This means that we must seek to understand what someone says in terms of the talk that has preceded it and that therefore talk is viewed as exhibiting patterned sequences.
3. *Analysis is grounded in data.* Conversation analysts shun prior theoretical schemes and instead argue that characteristics of talk and of the constitutive nature of social order in each empirical instance must be induced out of data.

Heritage (1987: 258) has written: 'it is assumed that social actions work *in detail* and hence that the specific details of interaction cannot simply be ignored as insignificant without damaging the prospects for coherent and effective analyses.' This assumption represents a manifesto for the emphasis on fine-grained details (including length of pauses, prolongation of sounds, and so on) that is the hallmark of CA.

Transcription and attention to detail

As the third of the three assumptions associated with CA indicates, the approach requires the analyst to produce detailed transcripts of natural conversation. Consider the portion of transcript in Research in focus 22.1, which contains some of the basic notational symbols employed in CA (see Tips and skills 'Basic notational symbols in Conversation Analysis' for an explanation of some of these).

The attention to detail in the sequence in Research in focus 22.1 is very striking and represents a clear difference from the way in which talk is normally treated by social researchers—for example, in their transcription conventions when analysing qualitative interviews. But what is significant in this sequence of talk?

Silverman (1994) draws two main inferences from the sequence in Research in focus 22.1. First, *P* initially tries to deflect any suggestion that there might be a special reason that she needs a test. As a result, the disclosure that she has been engaging in potentially risky behaviour

is delayed. Second, *P*'s use of 'you' depersonalizes her behaviour. Silverman (1994: 75) argues that sequences like these show how 'people receiving HIV counselling skilfully manage their talk about delicate topics'. The hesitations are designed by patients to establish that issues like these are not the subject of normal conversation; the rather general replies to questions are meant to indicate that the speaker is not the kind of person who will immediately launch into a discussion about difficult sexual matters with a stranger. Silverman (1994: 76) suggests that the notion that the hesitancy and depersonalization on the part of *P* is to do with her embarrassment about talking about sex is 'severely limited' and that instead we find that 'the production and management of delicate topics is skilfully and co-operatively organized between professionals and clients'.

This analysis shows how attention to fine details is an essential ingredient of CA work. Pauses and emphases are not to be regarded as incidental or of little significance in terms of what the speaker is trying to achieve; instead, they are part of 'the specific details of interaction [that] cannot simply be ignored as insignificant', as Heritage put it in the quotation above.

Some basic tools of conversation analysis

The gradual accumulation of detailed analyses of talk in interaction has resulted in a recognition that there are recurring features of the ways in which talk is organized. These features can be regarded as tools that can be applied to sequences of conversation. The following tools are presented merely to provide a flavour of the ways in which CA proceeds.

Turn-taking

One of the most basic ideas in CA is the notion that one of the ways in which order is achieved in everyday conversation is through **turn-taking**. This is a particularly important tool of conversation analysis, because it illustrates that talk depends on shared codes. If such codes did not exist, there would not be smooth transitions



Tips and skills Don't collect too much data

If you are doing a project based on CA, do not be tempted to collect too much data. The real work of CA goes into the painstaking analysis that its underlying theoretical stance requires. It may be that just one or two portions of transcribed text will allow you to address your research questions using the technique.

in conversation. In other words, there must be codes for indicating the ends of utterances.

Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998: 47) summarize this model as indicating that: '(1) turn-taking occurs; (2) one speaker tends to talk at a time; and (3) turns are taken with as little gap or overlap between them as possible'. This is not to say that turn-taking 'errors' do not occur. They manifestly do, as the discussion of *repair mechanisms* below suggests. One of the ways in which turn-taking is revealed is through the examination of **adjacency pairs**, which are the focus of the next section.

Adjacency pairs

The idea of the adjacency pair draws attention to the well-attested tendency for some kinds of activity as revealed in talk to involve two linked phases: a question followed by an answer, as in Research in focus 22.1; an invitation followed by a response (accept/decline); or a greeting followed by a returned greeting. The first phase invariably implies that the other part of the adjacency pair will be forthcoming—for example, that an invitation will be responded to. The second phase is of interest to the conversation analyst not just because it becomes a springboard for a response in its own right but because compliance with the putative normative structure of the pairing indicates an appreciation of how one is supposed to respond to the initial phase. In this way, 'intersubjective understandings' are continuously reinforced (Heritage 1987: 259–60). This is not to imply that the second phase will *always* follow the first; indeed, the response to a failure to comply with the expected response has itself been the focus of attention by conversation analysts.

Preference organization

While it is true to say that the second phase in an adjacency pair is always anticipated, some responses are clearly preferential to others. An example is that, when an invitation or a request is proffered, acceptance does not have to be justified, whereas a refusal does have to be justified. A further example is that, when an attempt to be self-deprecating is provided, it will be met with disagreement rather than agreement. In each case, the former (acceptance, disagreement) is the *preferred response* and the latter (refusal, agreement) is the *dispreferred response*. Therefore, the preference structure is discovered by the conversation analyst through the response to an initial statement.

Speakers' awareness of the preference organization of such pairings has implications for the structure of a conversation. For example, Potter (1996: 59) contrasts a sequence in which an offer is met with a straightforward preferred response of acceptance—'thank you'—with the sequence in Research in focus 22.2, in which an invitation is declined (the dispreferred response).

Potter argues that this kind of response by *A* is fairly typical of acceptance rejections, which are, of course, dispreferred responses. Potter draws attention to several features that contrast strikingly with the unequivocal 'thank you' associated with the case of acceptance. For example, *A* delays the start of his or her response and fills it with 'hehh'. Also, the rejection is 'softened' by *A* saying that he or she does not 'think' he or she can make it and is accompanied by an explanation for failing to provide the preferred response. Moreover, Potter follows the admonition not to make inferences about speakers' motivations by observing that the notion of a preference



Research in focus 22.2

Conversation analysis in action: a dispreferred response

1. *B*: Uh if you'd care to come over and visit a little while
2. this morning I'll give you a cup of coffee.
3. *A*: hehh
4. Well
5. that's awfully sweet of you,
6. I don't think I can make it this morning. hh uhm
7. I'm running an ad in the paper and—and uh I have to
8. stay near the phone (Atkinson and Drew 1979: 58; quoted in Potter 1996: 59)

structure is a feature of the talk not the motivations of the participants. After all, *A* may actually have preferred to accept the invitation but was prevented from doing so by a prior commitment. The key point is that the participants recognize the preference structure of this kind of adjacency pairing, and this affects the form of their response (that is, hesitancy, acknowledgement of the invitation, and providing an explanation) in the case of declining the offer or an unelaborated (or barely elaborated) response in the case of acceptance.

Accounts

A feature of the sequence in Research in focus 22.2 is that from line 7 onwards *A* formulates an account of why it is that the invitation cannot be accepted. As Potter observes, the account does two things: it establishes a reason for declining the invitation and depicts *A* as constrained by circumstances. The important feature to note in the treatment of accounts in CA is that they are analysed in context—that is, the form that they assume is handled as being occasioned by what precedes it (an invitation). Unlike the traditional view of accounts in sociology, a CA view of *A*'s account is to stress the importance of depicting it as allowing the invitation to be construed in a positive light even though it cannot be accepted, thereby allowing the relationship between the two parties not to be jeopardized. Moreover, in CA, accounts are not unusual phenomena to be deployed when things go wrong but are intrinsic to talk in a variety of situations. What is also striking about this sequence as an account is that it is in essence simply a description of a state of affairs (having an advertisement in the paper and as a result needing to stay close to the telephone in case there are calls). The factual nature of the account further allows the relationship between the two parties to be unharmed by *A*'s dispreferred response.

Repair mechanisms

Of course, things do go wrong in conversations, as occurs when turn-taking conventions are not followed so that there is overlapping of people talking. Silverman (1993: 132) notes several repair mechanisms, such as:

- when someone starts to speak before someone else has finished, the initial speaker stops talking before completing his or her turn;
- when a turn transfer does not occur at an appropriate point (for example, when someone does not respond to a question), the speaker may speak again, perhaps reinforcing the need for the other person to speak (for example, by reinforcing the question).

The crucial point to note about such repair mechanisms is that they allow the rules of turn-taking to be maintained in spite of the fact that they have been breached.

Overview

This review of CA can only scratch the surface of an approach that has developed a highly sophisticated way of studying talk in interaction. It has sometimes been suggested that it fails to capture body movements, but in recent times the use of video recordings has supplemented its tool kit of methods (e.g. Heath et al. 2010). Also, there has been a growing use of CA in connection with the examination of talk in institutional settings such as organizations and mediation sessions. CA can sometimes look as though its practitioners take an arbitrary piece of talk and theorize about it or that they 'cherry-pick' a sequence to fit a point they wish to make. However, as Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2008) make clear, there are several steps involved in the process: becoming aware of a feature of conversations that appears striking; bringing together possible exemplars of that conversational feature; uncovering the most striking of these exemplars; subjecting the clearest examples to a detailed analysis; examining those cases that are less clear; and conducting an analysis of deviant conversational cases. In other words, the examples of talk that appear in a publication based on CA and the points made about them are actually the end point of a rigorous process of analysis.

The insistence of conversation analysts that it is important to locate understanding in terms of sequences of talk, and therefore to avoid making extraneous inferences about the meanings of that talk, marks CA as representing a somewhat different approach from much qualitative research. As we have seen in previous chapters, qualitative researchers often claim (perhaps erroneously from the perspective of CA) that they seek to achieve understanding from the perspective of those being studied. Conversation analysts claim to do this only in so far as that understanding can be revealed in the specific contexts of talk. To import elements that are not specifically grounded in the here and now of what has just been said during a conversation risks the implanting of understanding that is not grounded in participants' own terms (Schegloff 1997).

Two points seem relevant here. First, this is a somewhat limiting stance, in that it means that the attribution of motives and meanings as a result of an in-depth understanding of a culture is illegitimate. While an interpretative understanding of social action carries the risk of misunderstanding, an approach that prohibits such

speculation is potentially restrictive. Second, CA is contextual in that it locates understanding in the sequences of talk. However, for the participants of an exchange, much of their talk is informed by their mutual knowledge of contexts. The analyst is restricted from taking those additional components of the context into account if they are not specifically part of the organization of talk. Again, this admonition seems to restrict the analyst more than is

desirable in many circumstances and to consign CA to a range of research questions that are amenable solely to the location of meaning in talk alone. On the other hand, CA reduces the risk about making unwarranted speculations about what is happening in social interaction and has contributed much to our understanding of the accomplishment of social order, which is one of the classic concerns of social theory.



Discourse analysis

Unlike CA, DA is an approach to language that can be applied to forms of communication other than talk. As such, it can be and has been applied to forms like texts, such as newspaper articles, and is in this respect more flexible than CA. Moreover, in DA there is much less of an emphasis on naturally occurring talk, so that talk in research interviews can be a legitimate target for analysis. However, DA should not be treated totally in opposition or contradistinction to CA, since it incorporates insights from it. In addition, DA incorporates insights from the work of continental philosophers like Michel Foucault (1926–84), for whom discourse was a term that denoted the way in which a particular set of linguistic categories relating to an object and the ways of depicting it frame the way we comprehend that object. The discourse forms a version of it. Moreover, the version of an object comes to *constitute* it. For example, a certain discourse concerning mental illness comes to make up our concepts of what mentally ill persons are like, the nature of their illness, how they should be treated, and who is legitimately entitled to treat them. The discourse then becomes a

framework for the justification for the power of practitioners concerned with the mentally ill and for their treatment regimes. In this way, a discourse is much more than language as such: it is constitutive of the social world that is a focus of interest or concern. Foucault's approach was to take a broad-brush historical approach to the study of discourse. Discourse analysts, in integrating insights from CA, results in a much more fine-grained analysis of talk and texts than was a feature of Foucault's approach.

Unlike CA, which by and large reveals a uniformity based on an orthodoxy associated with certain classic statements concerning its core practices (e.g. Sacks et al. 1974), there are several different approaches that are labelled as DA (Potter 1997). The version to be discussed in this section is one that has been of special interest to social researchers and is associated with such writers as Gilbert and Mulkay (1984); Potter and Wetherell (1987, 1994); Billig (1992), and Potter (1997). This version of DA (see Key concept 22.1) has been described as exhibiting two distinctive features at the level of **epistemology** and **ontology** (Potter 1997).



Key concept 22.1 What is discourse analysis?

There is no one version of discourse analysis (DA). The version described in the main body of this section is one that has been of particular interest to social scientists and that can be applied to both naturally occurring and contrived forms of talk and to texts. According to Potter (1997: 146), DA 'emphasizes the way versions of the world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse'. Language is depicted in discourse analysis as constituting or producing the social world; it is not simply a means of understanding that world, as it is in most quantitative and qualitative research methods.

In the next section, a variant of discourse analysis—**critical discourse analysis**—will be discussed. Critical discourse analysis, which is very influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, seeks to link language and its modes of use to the significance of power and social difference in society.

1. It is *anti-realist*; in other words, it denies that there is an external reality awaiting a definitive portrayal by the researcher and it therefore disavows the notion that any researcher can arrive at a privileged account of the aspect of the social world being investigated. Some discourse analysts, however, adopt a stance that is closer to a realist position, but most seem to be anti-realist in orientation.
2. It is *constructionist*; in other words, the emphasis is placed on the versions of reality propounded by members of the social setting being investigated and on the fashioning of that reality through their renditions of it (see Key concept 2.6). More specifically, the constructionist emphasis implies a recognition that discourse entails a selection from many viable renditions and that in the process a particular depiction of reality is built up.

Thus, discourse is not simply a neutral device for imparting meaning. People seek to accomplish things when they talk or when they write; DA is concerned with the strategies they employ in trying to create different kinds of effect. This version of DA is therefore action-oriented—that is, a way of getting things done. This is revealed in three basic discourse-analytic questions:

1. What is this discourse doing?
2. How is this discourse constructed to make this happen?
3. What resources are available to perform this activity? (Potter 2004: 609)

Research questions in DA tend to be fairly open-ended at least initially and then narrowed down. Writing about their research on mealtimes among families and how food was discursively constructed during and in relation to those occasions, Wiggins and Potter (2008) say that, following initial scrutiny of transcripts, they decided to focus on evaluation during mealtimes, such as:

1. (0.8)
2. Simon: mm↑mm: (0.2) that's
3. ↑lovely
4. (0.6)

(Wiggins and Potter 2008: 84)

This narrowed focus led them to be guided by research questions such as: 'how are food evaluations used by

speakers in realtime interaction?' and 'what are the different forms of food evaluations and what actions are they involved with?' (Wiggins and Potter 2008: 80).

The action orientation of DA (what is the discourse doing?) is usefully revealed in a study of the first few moments of telephone calls to a National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) helpline. Through an analysis of these call openings, Potter and Hepburn (2004) show that these first few moments perform certain actions:

- They are the springboard for the caller specifying the details of his or her concerns.
- They seek to establish that the child protection officer who receives the call is someone who, as an expert, can verify the caller's concerns.
- The caller makes it clear that he or she is concerned but not so concerned or certain about the status of the situation as to contact the police.
- The child protection officer is able to treat the report as serious without having to presuppose the truth or seriousness of the report.

Thus, through an analysis of these brief moments of conversation, the flow of discourse achieves a number of objectives for both parties and is therefore action. Similarly, Wiggins and Potter (2008) note that the 'mmm' that appears in the brief sequence of four lines in the context of their research on mealtimes appeared quite frequently in their transcripts. They depict these 'mmm's as: expressions of gustatory delight that occur within sequences of verbal interaction; as evaluations of food that occur within verbal interaction; and as expressions of embodiment within verbal interaction. In other words, the simple and recurring 'mmm' accomplishes several tasks within verbal interaction.

In addition, DA shares with CA a preference for locating contextual understanding in terms of the situational specifics of talk. As Potter (1997: 158) puts it, discourse analysts prefer to avoid making reference in their analyses to what he refers to as 'ethnographic particulars' and argues that instead they prefer 'to see things as things that are worked up, attended to and made relevant in interaction rather than being external determinants'. However, some DA practitioners are less wedded to this principle than conversation analysts, in that the former sometimes show a greater preparedness to make reference to 'ethnographic particulars'. However, in the case of the study by Wiggins and Potter (2008) of conversations during mealtimes, there is a close link with the preferences of CA practitioners to keep the analysis located

within ongoing conversational sequences, and indeed it employs CA notation to present the material examined.

Discourse analysts resist the idea of codifying their practices and indeed argue that such a codification is probably impossible. Instead, they prefer to see their style of research as an 'analytic mentality' and as 'a craft skill, more like bike riding or chicken sexing than following the recipe for a mild chicken rogan josh' (Potter 1997: 147–8). One useful point of departure for DA research that has been suggested by Gill (1996) following Widdicombe (1993) is to treat the way that something is said as being 'a solution to a problem' (Widdicombe 1993: 97; quoted in Gill 1996: 146). She also suggests adopting a posture of 'sceptical reading' (Gill 2000).

This means searching for a purpose lurking behind the ways that something is said or presented. Gill has also proposed that DA can be usefully thought of as comprising four main themes, which are outlined in Thinking deeply 22.1.

The bulk of the exposition of DA that follows is based on two studies: research on scientists' discourse and the use of numbers in a television programme on cancer. In the case of the former, we will see that attention to scientists' discourse is a solution to problems of how to represent their practices in formal and informal settings; the study of the television programme demonstrates that the examination of discourse reveals how claims about facts can be boosted or undermined through the use of



Tips and skills

Using existing material

As some of the examples of DA show, you may well be able to employ the technique to illuminate issues of interest to you on materials that are in the public domain, such as speeches. In many cases, these will be available in electronic form. This means that you do not have to put a lot of effort into the collection of data, though it will still be necessary to seek out the materials. Instead, you can give greater emphasis to analysing the materials using the DA approach. See Research in focus 22.3 for an example.



Thinking deeply 22.1

Four themes in discourse analysis

Gill (2000) has drawn attention to four prominent themes in DA.

1. *Discourse is a topic.* This means that discourse is a focus of enquiry itself and not just a means of gaining access to aspects of social reality that lie behind it. This view contrasts with a traditional research interview in which language is a way of revealing what interviewees think about a topic or their behaviour and the reasons for that behaviour.
2. *Language is constructive.* This means that discourse is a way of constituting a particular view of social reality. Moreover, in rendering that view, choices are made regarding the most appropriate way of presenting it, and these will reflect the disposition of the person responsible for devising it.
3. *Discourse is a form of action.* As Gill (2000: 175) puts it, language is viewed 'as a practice in its own right'. Language is a way of accomplishing acts, such as attributing blame, presenting oneself in a particular way, or getting an argument across. Moreover, a person's discourse is affected by the context that he or she is confronting. Thus, your account of your reasons for wanting a job may vary according to whether you are addressing interviewees in a job interview, members of your family, or friends. See Research in focus 22.3 for an example.
4. *Discourse is rhetorically organized.* This means that DA practitioners recognize that discourse is concerned with 'establishing one version of the face of competing versions' (Gill 2000: 176). In other words, there is a recognition that we want to persuade others when we present a version of events or whatever.

a language of quantification. A further element to be sensitive to is that, as Gill (1996), following Billig (1991), suggests, what is said is always a way of *not* saying something else. In other words, either total silence on a topic, or formulating an argument in a conversation or article in one way rather than in another way, is a crucial component of seeing discourse as a solution to a problem. As

we will see, the silences about aspects of their procedures in the scientists' published papers are crucial to conveying a sense of the fixed, neutral nature of their findings; in the case of the television programme, conveying a quantitative argument in one way rather than in another way is crucial to undermining the credibility of claims about success in the treatment of cancer.



Research in focus 22.3

Discourse as action

On several occasions, it has been noted that, for DA practitioners, discourse is a form of action. Discourse is performative—it does things. An example is provided by a DA-informed examination by O'Reilly et al. (2009) of the decision letters written by representatives of Research Ethics Committees (RECs) to researchers who apply for ethical clearance to conduct health-related research. The authors write: 'We argue that RECs use texts not only to do their own accountability, using a range of discursive devices to display the quality of their own work and the resulting decisions, but also to establish the accountability of applicants for the quality of their applications' (O'Reilly et al. 2009: 248). They note four ways in which accountability is performed in the letters:

1. Referring to the *process behind the decision*. The letters often draw attention to the rigorous discussion and thought that went into the REC's decision, referring to things like 'considered carefully' and 'discussed the protocol at great length'.
2. *Holding the applicants accountable*. This tactic entails the decision letter making it clear that, when ethical issues are raised about the application, it is the applicant who is accountable for the REC's decision, not the REC. This justifies the REC's decision and the demands for revision that it makes.
3. Reference to the REC's *specialist expertise*. Requests or instructions for revision of applications or for declining applications often draw attention to the specific expertise of particular REC members.
4. Invoking *external authorities*. Here, a decision is legitimated by reference to an applicant's failure to conform to official guidelines. An example is the following statement concerning an application that was given a provisional outcome but that was later accepted: 'For the storage of samples, patient information sheets and consent forms should conform to the current MRC publication on Human Tissue and Biological Samples for use in Research – Operational and Ethical guidelines. These are available from the MRC website, www.mrc.ac.uk' (quoted in O'Reilly et al. 2009: 256).

This study shows that accountability is performed first in the obvious sense that the REC accounts for its decision but also in the sense that it deflects blame for what are disappointing decisions for applicants onto the applicants themselves.

Potter and Wetherell (1994) suggest that there are two tendencies within the kind of DA work being discussed in this chapter, although they acknowledge that the distinction is somewhat artificial. One is the identification of 'the general resources that are used to construct discourse and enable the performance of particular actions' (1994: 48–9), which is concerned with identifying **interpretative repertoires**. The other is concerned to identify 'the detailed procedures through which versions are constructed and made to look factual' (1994: 49). We will now explore these two strands of DA.

Uncovering interpretative repertoires

In order to illustrate the idea of an interpretative repertoire, an influential study of scientists by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) will be employed. This research is outlined in some detail in Research in focus 22.4. Gilbert and Mulkay noticed a distinct difference between the ways in which the scientists presented their work in formal contexts, most notably the scientific paper, and in informal contexts, such as in the interviews with the researchers. Such differences went far beyond rather

predictable differences in tone of presentation, in that they also related to such areas as the depiction of the ways in which the findings emerged. For example, Gilbert and Mulkey noted an instance in which a scientific paper portrayed a model as emerging out of the data, whereas in the research interview the rendition is one of reinterpreting the model, which in turn suggested seeing the existing data from a different perspective, which in turn suggested a new series of experiments. Similarly, Gilbert

and Mulkey found that the sections of the scientific papers that described the experimental methodology portrayed the procedures in terms that suggested they were neutral operations that were largely independent of the scientist and could be replicated by anyone. In the research interviews, however, the scientists emphasized the operation of practical skills that are the product of experience and developing a 'feel' for experimental work. As one scientist put it:



Research in focus 22.4

Discourse analysis in action: the study of interpretative repertoires in scientists' discourse

Gilbert and Mulkey's (1984) research on scientists' discourse is concerned with the field of bioenergetics and in particular with the process whereby scientists working in this area come to understand a mechanism dubbed by them 'oxidative phosphorylation'. The main source of Gilbert and Mulkey's data derives from interviews with thirty-four researchers in this field. The interviews lasted between two-and-a-half and three hours on average. The authors describe the process of analysing the resulting data as follows:

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. We then read through the transcripts and copied those pages which included material relating to the topics which interested us. The passages from the interviews concerning each topic were placed together in 'topic files', so that we had convenient access to all the material on, for instance, consensus or diagrams and pictorial representations. We aimed to make each file as inclusive as possible so that no passage which could be read as dealing with a particular topic was omitted from its file. (Gilbert and Mulkey 1984: 19)

In addition, the authors drew on further sources, such as: privately circulated letters written by leading authorities in the field; the main articles in the field; and copies of the chief textbooks in the field. Through an examination of the ways in which textbooks and articles on the one hand explained the research process and accounts of how research was done provided by the scientists themselves, Gilbert and Mulkey were able to build up a picture of the differences between the empiricist repertoire and the contingent repertoire.

How could you write it up? It would be like trying to write a description of how to beat an egg. Or like trying to read a book on how to ski. You'd just get the wrong idea altogether. You've got to go and watch it, see it, do it. There's no substitute for it. These are *practical* skills. We all know that practical skills are not well taught by bits of paper. (Quoted in Gilbert and Mulkey 1984: 53)

Gilbert and Mulkey argue that in the formal context of the scientific paper an *empiricist repertoire* prevailed. This concept was derived from 'the observation that the texts of experimental papers display certain recurrent stylistic, grammatical, and lexical features which appear to be coherently related' (1984: 55–6). The empiricist

repertoire was revealed in such features as: an emphasis on procedural routines in the conduct of experiments, such that the findings appear as an inevitable, logical outcome; no mention of theoretical commitments on the part of authors; and an impersonal writing style with little or no mention of the authors' role in the production of the findings. By contrast, in the informal milieu of the research interview, a *contingent repertoire* was in operation. In this context, 'scientists presented their actions and beliefs as heavily dependent on speculative insights, prior intellectual commitments, personal characteristics, indescribable skills, social ties and group membership' (1984: 56). In other words, when describing their research within a contingent repertoire, scientists were much less likely to present their findings as the inevitable

outcome of their experimental engagement with natural phenomena and were therefore far more likely to recognize their own role in the production of scientific findings. Gilbert and Mulkay then go on to show that, when scientists disagree with the positions of other scientists, they describe their own work within an empiricist repertoire, in which their own findings take on the character of natural inevitability through the following of proper procedure, but of other scientists the work is described within a contingent repertoire, which shows up their competitors' errors as the product of prejudices, theoretical commitments, bias, and so on.

The notion of the interpretative repertoire is interesting because it brings out the idea that belief and action take place within templates that guide and influence the writer or speaker. The two repertoires discussed by Gilbert and Mulkay by no means exhaust the range of possibilities: Potter and Wetherell (1987), for example, suggest that a community repertoire was used in the context of a riot in Bristol in 1980 to cast light on events and beliefs. In the process, the police were cast in the role of *agents provocateurs* rather than as keepers of the peace. What is particularly striking about Gilbert and Mulkay's research, however, is that the two repertoires are employed by scientists but in different contexts (in formal or informal contexts, and whether describing their own or competitors' procedures). In a similar vein, Billig's (1992: 149) research on the ways in which people talk about the royal family suggested that, when referring to the role of newspapers in providing information about its members, two positions were frequently held and deployed on different occasions: 'the papers as the sources of lies and the papers as the source of knowledge'. Such a recognition of

the almost simultaneous use of different repertoires brings to the fore the 'dilemmatic' nature of thinking in these and other environments (Billig et al. 1988).

Producing facts

As with the exposition of interpretative repertoires in DA, in this section a study will be employed as a lens through which to view the practice of discourse analytic research. On this occasion, the emphasis is upon the resources that are employed in conveying allegedly factual knowledge. The researchers were especially interested in the role of what they call *quantification rhetoric*, by which is meant the ways in which numerical and non-numerical statements are made to support or refute arguments. The interest in this issue lies in part in the importance of quantification in everyday life and in part in the tendency for many social scientists to make use of this strategy themselves (John 1992). The specific focus of the research was upon a study of a television programme shown on Channel 4 in April 1988 and entitled *Cancer: Your Money or your Life* (Potter et al. 1991; Potter and Wetherell 1994). Among other things, the programme claimed to show that the huge amounts of money donated by the public to cancer charities are doing little to 'cure' the disease. The details of the materials used in the research and an outline of the process of analysis are provided in Research in focus 22.5. Research in focus 22.6 provides a key part of the transcript of the television programme itself.

In proceeding with an analysis of their data, such as the portions of transcript in Research in focus 22.6, Potter and Wetherell employed several devices.



Research in focus 22.5

Discourse analysis in action: producing facts through quantification rhetoric

The study of the representation of facts in the television programme *Cancer: Your Money or your Life* (Potter et al. 1991; Potter and Wetherell 1994) used a variety of different sources:

- a video recording of the programme;
- the observations of one of the members of the team making the programme, who acted as a participant observer while it was being made;
- drafts of the script, shooting schedules, and recordings of editing sessions;
- the entire interviews with the various people interviewed for the programme (such as cancer research specialists and heads of charities);
- research interviews with some of the latter people;
- research interviews with some of the people involved in making the programme.

One of the phases of the analysis entailed the 'coding' of the various sources that had been collected. The authors tell us:

We made a list of about a dozen keywords and phrases that related to the sequence—percentage, cure rates, death rates, 1 per cent, etc.—and then ran through each of the interview and interaction files, looking for them with a standard word-processor . . . Whenever we got a 'hit' we would read the surrounding text to see if it had relevance to our target sequence. When it did we would copy it across to an already opened coding file . . . noting the transcript page numbers at the same time. If we were not sure if the sequence was relevant we copied it anyway, for, unlike the sorts of coding that take place in traditional content analysis, the coding is not the analysis itself but a preliminary to make the task of analysis manageable. (Potter and Wetherell 1994: 52)

A prominent sequence used in the research is provided in Research in focus 22.6.



Research in focus 22.6

Sequence from the study of the television programme *Cancer: Your Money or your Life*

The following sequence occurred roughly halfway through the television programme *Cancer: Your Money or Your Life*, following interviews with cancer scientists who cast doubt on whether their research, much of it funded by charities, results in successful treatment:

Commentary The message from these scientists is clear—exactly like the public—they hope their basic research will lead to cures in the future—although at the moment they can't say how this will happen. In the meantime, their aim is to increase scientific knowledge on a broad front and they're certainly achieving this. But do their results justify them getting so much of the money that has been given to help fight cancer? When faced with this challenge the first thing the charities point to are the small number of cancers which are now effectively curable.

[on screen: DR NIGEL KEMP CANCER RESEARCH CAMPAIGN]

Kemp The outlook for individuals suffering from a number of types of cancer has been totally revolutionized. I mean for example—children suffering from acute leukaemia—in old days if they lived six months they were lucky—now more than half the children with leukaemia are cured. And the same applies to a number of other cancers—Hodgkin's Disease in young people, testicular tumours in young men, and we all know about Bob Champion's success [Champion was a prominent jockey who contracted testicular cancer, made a much-heralded recovery, won the Grand National, and even had a movie made about him]. (Potter and Wetherell 1994: 52–3)

At this point a table showing the annual incidence of thirty-four types of cancer begins to scroll on the screen. The total incidence is 243,000 and the individual incidences range from placenta (20) to lung (41,400). The three forms of cancer mentioned by Kemp and their levels of incidence are highlighted in yellow: childhood leukaemia (350), testis (1,000), and Hodgkin's Disease (1,400). The programme continues while the table is scrolling.

Commentary But those three curable types are amongst the rarest cancers—they represent around 1 per cent of a quarter of a million cases of cancers diagnosed each year. Most deaths are caused by a small number of very common cancers.

Kemp We are well aware of the fact that erm once people develop lung cancer or stomach cancer or cancer of the bowel sometimes—the outlook is very bad and aaa obviously one is frustrated by the sss relatively slow rate of progress on the one hand but equally I think there are a lot of real opportunities and and positive signs that advances can be made—even in the more intractable cancers. (Potter and Wetherell 1994: 53)

Looking for rhetorical detail

Attention to rhetorical detail entails a sensitivity to the ways in which arguments are constructed. Thus, during the editing of the film, the programme-makers' discourse suggested they were looking for ways to provide a convincing argument for their case that cancer remains largely intractable in spite of the money spent on it. The programme-makers very consciously devised the strategy outlined in the section on 'Using variation as a lever' below of playing down the numerical significance of those cancers that are amenable to treatment. Moreover, Potter et al. (1991) point out that one element of their argumentative strategy is to employ a tactic they call a 'preformulation', whereby a possible counter-argument is discounted in the course of presenting an argument, as when the commentary informs us: 'When faced with this challenge the first thing the charities point to are the small number of cancers which are now effectively

curable.' Research in focus 22.7 examines a further rhetorical device that is employed in making a persuasive argument.

Rhetorical analysis is a mode of analysis that is often used in its own right. Researchers interested in rhetorical analysis emphasize the ways in which arguments are constructed either in speech or in written texts and the role that various linguistic devices (such as metaphor, analogy, and irony) play in the formulation of arguments. In their study of the decision letters produced by RECs (see Research in focus 22.3), O'Reilly et al. (2009) noted several rhetorical constructions in the letters. They noted the use of third-person terms (for example, 'the Committee'), which were employed to give a sense of an authoritative and official judgment. The authors also note that the letters are rhetorically organized to negate alternative versions of ethical practice, thereby privileging the REC rendering.



Research in focus 22.7

The extreme case formulation: the social construction of the asylum-seeker

Discourse analysts have examined a variety of different rhetorical strategies through which arguments are formulated. One interesting form is known as the *extreme case formulation*. Potter (1996: 187) gives the example of someone who returns an item of clothing to a dry cleaner claiming that it has damaged the clothing might emphasize the significance of the claim by suggesting that the item is not simply new but 'brand new'. An interesting use of the concept can be found in connection with a study of letters to newspapers written by members of the general public in connection with 'asylum-seekers', who were the focus of considerable controversy during the period the letters were written (March to September 2001). The researchers point to a 'striking predominance' of two rhetorical strategies in the discourse surrounding asylum-seekers, of which the extreme case formulation was one (Lynn and Lea 2003: 446). Examples, with the extreme case formulation elements underlined, are:

Perhaps if they learned to say no now and again instead of accepting every freebie that comes their way any resentment would melt away. (*Sun*)

Asylum-seekers who are genuine should have no qualms about being held in a reception centre. (*Daily Mail*)

A solution to the problem of dispersing asylum-seekers is staring us in the face—namely, billet them free of charge on white liberals. That would have the advantage of both dispersing asylum-seekers widely and to areas with no social deprivation. White liberals will, of course, be only too happy to welcome them into their homes. Indeed it is most odd that they have not been queuing up to offer their services. (*Independent*)

The extreme case formulation allows the writer to convey a position that is hostile to asylum-seekers that simultaneously justifies that position. In essence, it acknowledges that a possibly extreme position is being presented that is unsympathetic to asylum-seekers and that might even be viewed as racist, but uses the extreme case formulation in order to legitimize the position. It forms an important ingredient in the social construction of the asylum-seeker as someone who is unfairly advantaged relative to UK citizens and who is a possible threat to the social order.

Using variation as a lever

The authors draw attention to the phrase '1 per cent of a quarter of a million' (see Research in focus 22.6), because it incorporates two quantitative expressions: a relative expression (a percentage) and an absolute frequency (quarter of a million). The change of the register of quantification is important, because it allows the programme-makers to make their case about the low cure levels (just 1 per cent) compared with the large number of new cases of cancer. They could have pointed to the absolute number of people who are cured, but the impact would have been less. Also, the 1 per cent is not being contrasted with 243,000 but with quarter of a million. Not only does this citation allow the figure to grow by 7,000; a quarter of a million sounds larger.

Reading the detail

Discourse analysts incorporate the CA preference for attention to the details of discourse. For example, Potter and Wetherell suggest that the description of the three 'curable cancers' as 'amongst the rarest cancers' is deployed to imply that these are atypical cancers, so that it is unwise to generalize to all cancers from experiences with them.

Looking for accountability

Discourse analysts draw on CA practitioners' interest in and approach to accounts. The programme-makers were concerned to be accountable for the position they took,

and Potter and Wetherell's (1994: 61) transcript of an editing session suggests they were keen to ensure they could defend their inference about the 1 per cent. From the point of view of both CA and DA, the extracts presented in Research in focus 22.5 can and should be regarded as accounts. The editing session notes suggest that it is the credibility of the account that was of concern to the programme-makers. For DA practitioners, the search for accountability entails attending to the details through which accounts are constructed.

Cross-referencing discourse studies

Potter and Wetherell suggest that reading other discourse studies is itself an important activity. First, it helps to sharpen the analytic mentality at the heart of DA. Second, other studies often provide insights that are suggestive for one's own data. They indicate that they were influenced by a study of market traders by Pinch and Clark (1986). This research showed that a kind of quantification rhetoric was often being used by the traders (though Pinch and Clark did not use this term) in order to convey a sense of value (such as selling a pen with a pencil). It appeared that something similar was occurring when the table was being scrolled whereby the large number of cancers and the long list of types were being contrasted with the small number (three) of curable ones. Similarly, the 'extreme case formulation' in the context of asylum-seekers discussed in Research in focus 22.7 could be compared to uses of this rhetorical device in other contexts and studies.



Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) emphasizes the role of language as a power resource that is related to ideology and socio-cultural change. It draws in particular on the theories and approaches of Foucault (e.g. 1977), who sought to uncover the representational properties of discourse as a vehicle for the exercise of power through the construction of disciplinary practices, such as individual subjectivity and the operation of rules and procedures that enabled the construction of disciplinary practices that enable the construction of the self-disciplining subject. The notion of discourse is therefore defined more broadly than in fine-grained approaches, as this summary by Phillips and Hardy (2002: 3) illustrates:

We define a discourse as an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being . . . In other words, social reality is produced and made real through discourses, and social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning. As discourse analysts, then, our task is to explore the relationship between discourse and reality.

As the final part of this quotation indicates, CDA practitioners are more receptive than discourse analysts to



Thinking deeply 22.2

Critical realism and the discourse of organization

Fairclough (2005) argues that a version of CDA based on critical realism (see Key concept 2.3) is of particular value to organization studies, especially in relation to the study of organizational change. Fairclough (2005: 917) is sceptical of the anti-realist assumptions of some discourse analysts who reject objectivist conceptions of organization as social structure in favour of seeing it as 'an interactive accomplishment', according to a constructionist perspective (see Chapter 2). He quotes Mumby and Clair (1997: 181) as typical of the latter position when they say 'we suggest that organizations exist only in so far as their members create them through discourse'.

Instead, Fairclough recommends an approach that centres on the tension between organizational discourse and organizational structure. Therefore, a critical realist approach to discourse analysis involves analysing not just the discourse *per se* but also its relationship to non-discursive elements. This is particularly important in relation to the study of organizational change because, 'while change in discourse is a part of organizational change, and organizational change can often be understood partly in terms of the constructive effects of discourse on organizations, organizational change is not simply change in discourse' (Fairclough 2005: 931). Fairclough identifies four sets of organizational research issues that a critical realist approach to discourse analysis can address:

1. *emergence*: founded on the notion that 'new' organizational discourses emerge 'through "reweaving" relations between existing discourses' (2005: 932);
2. *hegemony*: focusing on how particular discourses become hegemonic in particular organizations and on 'how discourse figures within the strategies pursued by groups of social agents to change organizations in particular directions' (2005: 933);
3. *recontextualization*: involving identification of the principles through which 'external' discourses are internalized within particular organizations;
4. *operationalization*: focusing on how discourses are operationalized, transformed into new ways of acting and interacting, inculcated into new ways of being, or materialized, within organizations.

the idea of a pre-existing material reality that constrains individual agency, and in particular to the epistemology of critical realism (see Key concept 2.3), arguing that discourses should be examined in relation to social structures, including the power relationships that are responsible for occasioning them (Reed 2000). Discourse is thus conceived as a 'generative mechanism' rather than as a self-referential sphere in which nothing of significance exists outside it, as Thinking deeply 22.2 explains.

In an organizational context, one of the things that CDA practitioners seek to trace is how discourses are constructed and maintained in relation to certain phenomena, such as globalization (see Research in focus 22.8). Analysis seeks to reveal the meaning of a particular phenomenon by exploring how:

- the discourse came to have a particular meaning today when 40 or 50 years ago it may have had none or a quite different meaning;

- the discourse draws on and influences other discourses;
- the discourse is constructed through texts (such as academic articles or journalistic writing);
- the discourse gives meaning to social life and makes certain activities possible, desirable, or inevitable;
- particular actors draw on the discourse to legitimate their positions and actions.

This list of analytic devices in CDA is based on Phillips and Hardy (2002: 8).

As the second point in the above list indicates, discourses are conceived of as drawing on and influencing other discourses; so, for example, the discourse of globalization might affect discourses on new technology, free trade and liberalism, or corporate social responsibility. However, this is not always a complementary process, as in some cases discourses compete with each other for dominance in what is termed *dialogical struggle* (Keenoy et al. 1997). An example of how the temporal evolution

of discourses can be traced analytically is provided in Research in focus 22.8 in relation to globalization. Critical discourse analysis thus involves exploring why some meanings become privileged or taken for granted and others become marginalized. In other words, discourse does not just provide an account of what goes on in society; it is also a process whereby meaning is created. This involves asking 'who uses language, how, why and when' (van Dijk 1997: 2).

Analysis of a particular *discursive event* is usually carried out according to a 'three-dimensional' framework, which proceeds as follows:

- examination of the actual content, structure, and meaning of the text under scrutiny (*the text dimension*);
- examination of the form of discursive interaction used to communicate meaning and beliefs (*the discursive practice dimension*);
- consideration of the social context in which the discursive event is taking place (*the social practice dimension*) (Grant et al. 2004: 11).

A further key concept within CDA is the notion of *intertextuality*. This draws attention to the notion of discourse as existing beyond the level of any particular discursive event on which analysis is focused. The notion of intertextuality thus enables a focus on the social and historical context in which discourse is embedded. Further examples of the use of CDA can be found in Research in focus 23.7 and 23.8.



Research in focus 22.8

A critical analysis of globalization discourses

Fairclough and Thomas (2004) examine the discourse of globalization in relation to the process of organizing. Outlining various debates between commentators on globalization, the authors argue that 'we should not be asking what globalization is, but why certain versions of it seem to dominate our thinking in relation to the issue of organization. At the same time we need to be sensitive to the changeability of discourse and to the diverse ways in which the discourse develops. In short, we should consider the potential diversity of the discourse, but also seek to explain why this potential is not necessarily realized' (2004: 380). Using key texts in the literature on globalization, the authors analyse the consultancy-led 'hyperglobalist' discourse, which positions globalization as a positive force that represents a valuable opportunity for managers of corporations. They also analyse prescriptive texts that tell managers how to handle the challenges of globalization in a variety of respects and contexts and review the tendency for the globalization to be constructed as a reified object rather than a process within the discourse. However, they also note that 'discourses that appear to be dominant and hegemonic may not be so' (2004: 394). Instead they inevitably contain weaknesses that can be exploited, giving rise to counter-discourses.



Overview

As the discussion of DA has emphasized on several occasions, DA draws on insights from CA. Particularly when analysing strings of talk, DA draws on conversation analytic insights into the ways in which interaction is realized in and through talk in interaction. The CA injunction to focus on the talk itself and the ways in which intersubjective meaning is accomplished in sequences of talk is also incorporated into DA. This is not easy to achieve, and, when one reads articles based on DA, it sometimes

seems as though the practitioners come perilously close to invoking speculations that do not seem to be directly discernible in the sequences being analysed—that is, speculations about 'ethnographic particulars' and hence about motives.

Sometimes, there is a more explicit recognition of the potential contribution of an appreciation of the ethnographic context. Edley and Wetherell (1997) report findings relating to a study conducted within a DA framework.

The data were gathered from discussions held in three-person groups with 17–18-year-old boys in a UK school. The focus of the article was upon the construction of masculinity as it emerged in the course of the group discussions. However, one of the authors carried out observations within the school. This ethnographic research 'led to the identification of divisions within friendship groups in the sixth form as a major participant concern connected with formulations of masculinity within the school' (Edley and Wetherell 1997: 207). One of the key components of the friendship structure was the division between rugby players and the rest. Edley and Wetherell show that an important component of the construction of masculinity during talk among the non-players is their antipathy towards the rugby players. In other words, they defined their masculinity in contradistinction to the concepts of masculinity associated with the rugby players. However, the key point is that it is clear that the periods of ethnographic observation at least in part informed the discourse analytic interpretation of the sequences of talk that had been recorded. Such research suggests that the proscription concerning the recourse to ethnographic particulars is honoured more by some discourse analysts than others. It is easy to see why: attention to ethnographic details may alert the analyst to nuances and understandings that are not directly entrenched in the flow of discourse.

DA is in certain respects a more flexible approach to language in social research than CA, because it is not solely concerned with the analysis of naturally occurring talk, since practitioners also use various kinds of documents and research interviews in their work. Also, it permits the intrusion of understandings of what is going on that are not specific to the immediacy of previous utterances. It is precisely this to which conversation analysts object, as when Schegloff (1997: 183) writes about DA: 'Discourse is too often made subservient to contexts not of its participants' making, but of its analysts' insistence.' For their part, discourse analysts object to the restriction that this injunction imposes, because it means that conversation analysts 'rarely raise their eyes from the next turn in the conversation, and, further, this is not an entire conversation or sizeable slice of social life but usually a tiny fragment' (Wetherell 1998: 402). Thus, for discourse analysts, phenomena like interpretative repertoires are very much part of the context within which talk occurs, whereas in CA they are inadmissible evidence. But it is here that we see the dilemma for the discourse analyst, for, in seeking to admit a broader sense of context (such as attention to interpretative repertoires in operation) while wanting to stick close to the conversation

analysts' distaste for ethnographic particulars, they are faced with the uncertainty of just how far to go in allowing the inclusion of conversationally extraneous factors.

The anti-realist inclination of many DA practitioners has been a source of controversy, because the emphasis on representational practices through discourses sidelines any notion of a pre-existing material reality that can constrain individual agency. Reality becomes little more than that which is constituted in and through discourse. This lack of attention to a material reality that lies behind and underpins discourse has proved too abstracted for some social researchers and theorists. For example, writing from a critical realist position (see Key concept 2.3), Reed (2000) has argued that discourses should be examined in relation to social structures, such as power relationships, that are responsible for the occasioning of those discourses. Attention would additionally be focused on the ways in which discourses then work through existing structures. Discourse is thereby conceived as a 'generative mechanism' rather than as a self-referential sphere in which nothing of significance exists outside it. Reed (2000: 529) provides an interesting example of such an alternative view:

Discourses—such as the quantitatively based discourses of financial audit, quality control and risk management—are now seen as the generative mechanisms through which new regulatory regimes 'carried out' by rising expert groups—such as accountants, engineers and scientists—become established and legitimated in modern societies. What they represent is less important than what they do in facilitating a radical re-ordering of pre-existing institutional structures in favour of social groups who benefit from the upward mobility which such innovative regulatory regimes facilitate . . . (Reed 2000: 529)

As this passage suggests, while many DA practitioners are anti-realist, an alternative, realist position in relation to discourse is feasible. Such an alternative position is perhaps closer to the classic concerns of the social sciences than an anti-realist stance.

Many of these studies refer to their analysis of language using the term 'discourse'. However, the extensive use of this term brings its own problems, because what different researchers understand the term 'discourse' to mean varies considerably, and so does their approach to analysis. There is thus a danger, noted by Alvesson and

Kärreman (2000), that the term 'discourse analysis' is too broad to be meaningful, authors treating the term as though it has a clear, broadly agreed-upon meaning that, just from reading this chapter, you will be able to see it does not. Hence 'discourse sometimes comes close to standing for everything, and thus nothing' (Alvesson and

Kärreman 2000: 1128). However, the important thing to remember is that understanding how language is used is viewed by some researchers as crucial to understanding the social world, and the approaches examined in this chapter provide some tools through which language can be explored as a focus of attention in its own right.



Key points

- CA and DA approaches take the position that language is itself a focus of interest and not just a medium through which research participants communicate with researchers.
- CA is a systematic approach to conversation that locates action in talk.
- In CA, talk is deemed to be structured in the sense of following rules.
- Practitioners of CA seek to make inferences about talk that are not grounded in contextual details that are extraneous to talk.
- DA shares many features with CA but there are several different versions of it.
- DA can be applied to a wider variety of phenomena than CA, which is concerned just with naturally occurring talk.
- Discourse is conceived of as a means of conveying meaning.
- DA practitioners display a greater inclination to relate meaning in talk to contextual factors.



Questions for review

- In what ways does the role of language in conversation and discourse analysis differ from that which is typical in most other research methods?

Conversation analysis

- In what ways is CA fundamentally about the production of social order in interaction? Why are audio-recording and transcription crucial in CA?
- What is meant by each of the following: turn-taking; adjacency pair; preference organization; account; repair mechanism?
- How do the terms in the previous question relate to the production of social order?
- Evaluate Schegloff's (1997) argument that CA obviates the need to make potentially unwarranted assumptions about participants' motives.

Discourse analysis

- What is the significance of saying that DA is anti-realist and constructionist?
- What is an interpretative repertoire?
- What techniques are available to the discourse analyst when trying to understand the ways in which facts are presented through discourse?
- What are the chief points of difference between CA and DA?

Critical discourse analysis

- What is distinctive about critical DA?
 - What key questions might a CDA practitioner ask in seeking to reveal the meaning of globalization discourses?
 - Why is the notion of intertextuality important to CDA practitioners?
-

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Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of language in qualitative research. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.

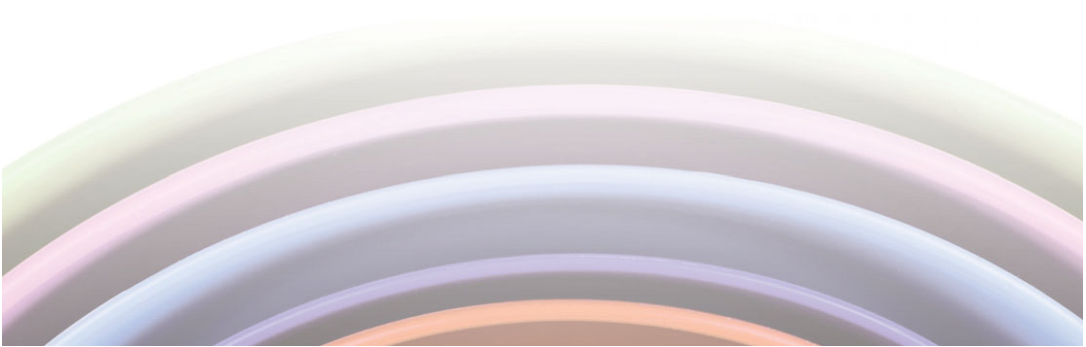
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23

Documents as sources of data

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Chapter guide

The term 'documents' covers a very wide range of different kinds of source. This chapter aims to reflect that variability by examining a wide range of different documentary sources that have been or can be used in qualitative research. In addition, the chapter touches on approaches to the analysis of such sources. The chapter explores:

- personal documents in both written form (such as diaries and letters) and visual form (such as photographs);
- official documents deriving from the state (such as public inquiries);
- official documents deriving from private sources (such as documents produced by organizations);
- mass-media outputs;
- virtual outputs, such as Internet resources;
- the criteria for evaluating each of the above sources;
- three approaches to the analysis of documents: qualitative content analysis; semiotics; and hermeneutics.

Introduction

This chapter will be concerned with a fairly heterogeneous set of sources of data, such as letters, diaries, autobiographies, newspapers, magazines, and photographs. The emphasis is placed on documents that have not been produced at the request of a social researcher—instead, the objects that are the focus of this chapter are simply 'out there' waiting to be assembled and analysed. However, this is not to suggest that the fact that documents are available for the social researcher to work on renders them somehow less time-consuming or easier to deal with than primary data that need to be collected or even that documents are unproblematic. On the contrary, the search for documents relevant to your research can often be a frustrating and highly protracted process. Moreover, once they are collected, considerable interpretative skill is required to ascertain the meaning of the materials that have been uncovered. Further, documents themselves are often implicated in chains of action that are a potential focus of attention in their own right.

Documents of the kind referred to in this chapter are materials that:

- can be read (though the term 'read' has to be understood in a somewhat looser fashion than is normally the case when we come to visual materials, like photographs);
- have not been produced specifically for the purpose of social research;
- are preserved so that they become available for analysis; and
- are relevant to the concerns of the social researcher.

Documents have already been encountered in this book, albeit in a variety of contexts or guises. For example, the kinds of source upon which content analysis is often carried out are documents, such as newspaper articles. However, the emphasis in this chapter will be upon the use of documents in qualitative research. A further way in which documents have previously surfaced was in the brief discussion in Key concept 14.3, which noted that archive materials are one form of unobtrusive method. Indeed, this points to an often-noted advantage of using documents of the kind discussed in this chapter—namely, they are non-reactive. This means that, because they have not been created specifically for the purposes of social research, the possibility of a reactive effect can be largely discounted as a limitation on the validity of data.

In discussing the different kinds of documents used in the social sciences, J. Scott (1990) has usefully distinguished between personal documents and official

documents and has further classified the latter in terms of private as opposed to state documents. These distinctions will be employed in much of the discussion that follows. A further set of important distinctions made by Scott relate to the criteria for assessing the quality of documents. He suggests (J. Scott 1990: 6) four criteria.

1. Authenticity. Is the evidence genuine and of unquestionable origin?

2. Credibility. Is the evidence free from error and distortion?

3. Representativeness. Is the evidence typical of its kind, and, if not, is the extent of its untypicality known?

4. Meaning. Is the evidence clear and comprehensible?

This is an extremely rigorous set of criteria against which documents might be assessed, and frequent reference to them will be made in the following discussion.



Personal documents

This section discusses the nature of and issues involved in using a variety of kinds of personal documents that individuals produce and that are often used in social research.

Diaries, letters, and autobiographies

Diaries and letters have been used a great deal by historians but have not been given a great deal of attention by social researchers. The latter have tended to employ these as sources when they have been specifically elicited from their authors. The researcher-driven diary has been

used as a method of data collection in both quantitative and qualitative research. A similar approach can be employed in relation to letters: for example, Ang (1985) placed an advertisement in a Dutch women's magazine asking readers to write to her about their reactions to and feelings about the American television series *Dallas*. She received forty-two letters in response to this advertisement. However, the kinds of diary and letter that are the focus of attention here are ones that have not been solicited by a researcher. Research in focus 23.1 and 23.2 provide examples of the use of personal documents in social research in both historical and more contemporary contexts.



Research in focus 23.1 Using historical personal documents: the case of Augustus Lamb

Dickinson (1993) provides an interesting account of the use of historical personal documents in the case of Augustus Lamb (1807–36), who was the only child of Lady Caroline Lamb and William Lamb, the second Viscount Melbourne. It is possible that Augustus suffered throughout his short life from epilepsy, though he seems to have suffered from other complaints as well. Dickinson was drawn to him because of her interest in nineteenth-century reactions to people with mental handicaps who were not institutionalized. In fact, Dickinson doubts whether the term 'mental handicap' is applicable to Augustus and suggests the somewhat milder description of having learning difficulties. The chief sources of data are 'letters from family and friends; letters to, about and (rarely) from Augustus' (Dickinson 1993: 122). These letters were found in collections at the Hertfordshire County Office, the British Museum, and Southampton University Library. Other sources used include the record of the post-mortem examination of Augustus and extracts from the diary of Augustus' resident tutor and physician for the years 1817–23. Dickinson employs these materials to demonstrate the difficulty of arriving at a definitive portrayal of what Augustus was like. At the same time, she shows the difficulties that people around him experienced in coming to terms with his conditions, in large part because of the difficulty they experienced in finding a vocabulary that was consistent with his high social status.

It is likely that the potential of letters in historical and social research is or will be fairly limited to a certain time period. As J. Scott (1990) observes, letter writing became a significant activity only after the introduction of an official postal service and in particular after the penny post in 1840. The emergence of the telephone as a prevalent form of communication may have limited the use of letter writing, and it is likely that the emergence of email communication, especially in so far as emails are not kept in electronic or printed form, is likely to mean that the role of letters has been declining for some time and may continue to do so. On the other hand, there is growing interest in emails in their own right among social researchers. For example, Sharf (1999) has reported how, while conducting research into rhetoric about breast cancer, she joined a listserv (a managed list of email addresses around a specific theme) on breast cancer and gradually realized that electronic communications had

considerable potential for her research. Research involving the study of emails and other forms of Internet-based communication are examined further in Chapter 28.

Whereas letters are a form of communication with other people, diarists invariably write for themselves, but, when written for wider consumption, diaries are difficult to distinguish from another kind of personal document—the autobiography. Like letters and diaries, autobiographies can be written at the behest of the researcher, particularly in connection with life history studies (see Chapter 20). When used in relation to the life history or biographical method, letters, diaries, and autobiographies (whether solicited or unsolicited) either can be the primary source of data or may be used as adjuncts to another source of data, such as life history or life story interviews. However, it is with extant documents that have not been produced for the purposes of research that this chapter is primarily concerned.



Research in focus 23.2

Using contemporary personal documents

Jacobs (1967) analysed 112 suicide notes written by adults and adolescents in the Los Angeles area who had successfully committed suicide. The notes were acquired in the course of a study of attempts by adolescents to commit suicide. The author writes that he was impressed with the 'rational and coherent character' of the notes (1967: 62) and attempts what he describes as a 'phenomenological' analysis of them. This analysis entailed attending to 'the conscious deliberations that take place before the individual is able to consider and execute the act of suicide' (1967: 64). Jacobs found that the notes fell into six groups, such as notes referring to an illness, a category that in turn was of two types: those in which the writers begged for forgiveness and those in which they did not.

The widespread distinction between biographies and autobiographies can sometimes break down. Walt Disney provides a case in point. As I have shown, Disney provided, in short articles he authored and in articles written by others, many snippets about his life (Bryman 1995). The first biography of Disney, written by his daughter, Diane Disney Miller (1956), would almost certainly have been fed information by its subject. Moreover, several writers have noted the 'sameness' about subsequent biographies. This feature can be attributed to the tight control by the Disney Archive, which is itself controlled by the Walt Disney Corporation. It is from the primary materials of this archive (letters, notes of meetings, and so on) that biographies would be fashioned. As a result, while Walt Disney never wrote an autobiography in the conventional meaning of the term, his hand and subsequently that of the company can be seen in the biographies that have been written.

When we evaluate personal documents, the *authenticity* criterion is clearly of considerable importance. Is the purported author of the letter or diary the real author? In the case of autobiographies, this has become a growing problem in recent years as a result of the increasing use of 'ghost' writers by the famous. But the same is potentially true of other documents. For example, in the case of Augustus Lamb (Research in focus 23.1), Dickinson (1993: 126–7) notes that there are 'only three letters existing from Augustus himself (which we cannot be certain were written in Augustus's own hand, since the use of amanuenses was not uncommon)'. This remark raises the question of how far Augustus was in fact the author of the entirety of the letters, especially in the light of his apparent learning difficulties. Turning to the issue of *credibility*, J. Scott (1990) observes that there are at least two major concerns with respect to personal documents: the factual accuracy of reports and whether they

do in fact report the true feelings of the writer. The case of Augustus Lamb, in which clear differences were found in views about him and his condition, suggests that the notion that there might be a definitive factually accurate account is at the very least problematic. Scott recommends a strategy of healthy scepticism regarding the sincerity with which the writer reports his or her true feelings. Famous people may be fully aware that their letters or diaries will be of considerable interest to others and may, therefore, have one eye firmly fixed on the degree to which they really reveal themselves in their writings, or alternatively ensure that they convey a 'front' that they want to project.

Letters have to be treated with similar caution, since they can frequently be exercises in reputation building. In the case of the suicide notes analysed by Jacobs (1967) (see Research in focus 23.2), although the notes themselves were found to be rational and coherent, it is possible that the individuals themselves were in a highly distressed state, so that it is not clear how far their true feelings were being revealed.

Representativeness is clearly a major concern for these materials. Since literacy was far lower in earlier times, letters, diaries, and autobiographies are likely to be the preserve of the literate and by and large the middle class. Moreover, since boys were often more likely to receive an education than girls, the voices of women tend to be under-represented in these documents. Women were also less likely to have had the self-confidence to write diaries and autobiographies. Therefore, such historical documents are likely to be biased in terms of authorship. A further problem is the selective survival of documents like letters. Why do any survive at all and what proportion are damaged, lost, or thrown away? We do not know, for example, how representative the 112 suicide notes analysed by Jacobs (1967; see Research in focus 23.2) are. Quite aside from the fact that only a relatively small percentage of suicide victims leave notes, it may be that notes are sometimes destroyed by family members. The question of *meaning* is often rendered problematic by such things as damage to letters and diaries and the use by authors of abbreviations or codes that are difficult to decipher. Also, as J. Scott (1990) observes, letter-writers may leave much unsaid in their communications, because they share with their recipients common values and assumptions that are not revealed.

Visual objects

There is a growing interest in the visual in social research, a point that was highlighted in Chapter 19. The photo-

graph is the most obvious manifestation of this trend, in that, rather than being thought of as incidental to the research process, photographs are becoming objects of interest in their own right (see Thinking deeply 23.1). Once again, there is a distinction between photographs and other visual objects that are produced as part of fieldwork and that were discussed in Chapter 19 and those that are extant (which are the focus of attention here). One of the main ways in which photographs may be of interest to social research is in terms of what they reveal about families. As J. Scott (1990) observes, many family photographs are taken as a record of ceremonial occasions (weddings, christenings) and of recurring events such as Christmas, annual holidays, and wearing a new uniform at the start of the new school year. Scott refers to a distinction between three types of home photograph: *idealization*, which is a formal pose—for example, the wedding photograph or a photograph of the family in its finery; *natural portrayal*, which entails capturing actions as they happen, though there may be a contrived component to the photograph; and *demythification*, which entails capturing an image of the subject in an untypical (and often embarrassing) situation. Scott suggests that it is necessary to be aware of these different types in order not to be exclusively concerned with the superficial appearance of the images and so that we can probe beneath that surface. He writes:

There is a great deal that photographs do not tell us about their world. Hirsch [1981: 42] argues, for example, that 'The prim poses and solemn faces which we associate with Victorian photography conceal the reality of child labour, women factory workers, whose long hours often brought about the neglect of their infants, nannies sedating their charges with rum, and mistresses diverting middle class fathers.' (J. Scott 1990: 195)

As Scott argues, this means not only that the photograph must not be taken at its face value when used as a research source; it is also necessary to have considerable additional knowledge of the social context to probe beneath the surface. In fact, one might wonder whether the photograph in such a situation can be of any use to a researcher at all. The researcher does not need the photograph to uncover the ills that formed the underbelly of Victorian society; its only purpose seems to be to suggest that there is a gap between the photographic image and the underlying reality. A similar kind of point is made by Sutton in Research in focus 23.3.



Thinking deeply 23.1

What are the roles of photographs in social research?

Photographs may have a variety of roles in relation to social research. While Chapter 19 and the present chapter discuss them in relation to qualitative research, there is no reason why they cannot be employed in quantitative research, and some researchers have employed them in this connection. For example, photographs could be the focus of content analysis or might be employed as prompts in connection with structured interviewing or an experiment. However, the growing interest in photographs and visual materials more generally has tended to come from qualitative researchers. There is an important distinction between the use of *extant* photographs that have not been produced for the research and *research-generated* photographs that have been produced by the researcher or at the researcher's behest. Three prominent roles have been:

1. *Illustrative.* Photographs may have a role whereby they do little more than illustrate points and therefore enliven what might otherwise be a rather dry discussion of findings. In some classic reports of their findings by anthropologists, photographs seemed to have such a limited role. Gradually, some anthropologists began to experiment with forms of ethnography in which photographs had a more prominent position.
2. *As data.* Photographs may be viewed as data in their own right. When based on research-generated photographs, they become essentially part of the researcher's field notes (see Research in focus 19.10 for an example). When based on extant photographs, they become the main source of data about the field in which the researcher is interested. The examples in the text of this section by Sutton (1992; Research in focus 23.3) and Blaikie (2001) are examples of this kind of use.
3. *As prompts.* Photographs may be used as prompts to entice people to talk about what is represented in them. Both research-driven photographs (see Research in focus 19.10) and extant photographs may be used in this way. Sometimes, research participants may volunteer the use of their photographs for this kind of use. For example, Riches and Dawson (1998) found that, in interviews with bereaved parents, unsolicited photographs with their deceased children were often shown. These photographs were frequently shown by the parents to others, so that their use in interviews merged with their existing practices for handling their grief. In this case, the photographs were extant ones. Research in focus 19.9 provides an illustration of the use of photographs of the research-generated kind, in that they were taken at the instigation of the researchers who were interested in the experience of homelessness.

Scott sees the issue of *representativeness* as a particular problem for the analyst of photographs. As he suggests, the photographs that survive the passage of time—for example, in archives—are very unlikely to be representative. They are likely to have been subject to all sorts of hazards, such as damage and selective retention. The example provided in Research in focus 23.3 of photographs of visits to Disney theme parks suggests that the process of discarding photographs may be systematic. The other problem relates to the issue of what is *not* photographed, as suggested by the quotation by Hirsch, and Sutton's suggestion that unhappy events at Disney theme parks may not be photographed at all. A sensitivity to what is not photographed can reveal the 'mentality' of the person(s) behind the camera. This is the point that Sutton is making: the absence of photographs depicting less happy experiences at the parks suggests something

about how the prospect of a visit to a Disney theme park is viewed and therefore tells us something about the reach of an influential corporation in the culture industry. What is clear is that the question of representativeness is much more fundamental than the issue of what survives, because it points to the way in which the selective survival of photographs may be constitutive of a reality that family members (or others) seek to fashion. As in Sutton's example, that very manufactured reality may then become a focus of interest for the social researcher in its own right.

The real problem for the user of photographs is that of recognizing the different ways in which the image may be comprehended. Blaikie (2001) found some fascinating photographs in the local museums of the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland. These photographs derived from the work of local photographers and donated family



Research in focus 23.3

Photographs of the Magic Kingdom

Sutton (1992) has noted a paradox about people's visits to Disney theme parks. On the one hand, the Magic Kingdom is supposed to be 'the happiest place on Earth', with employees ('cast members') being trained to enhance the experience. However, it is clear that some people do not enjoy themselves while visiting a park. The time spent in queues, in particular, was a gripe for Sutton, as it often is for other visitors ('guests') (Bryman 1995). Nonetheless, people expect their visit to be momentous and therefore take along their cameras (and increasingly camcorders, though Sutton does not make this point). Sutton argues that photographs distort people's memories of their visit. They take pictures that support their anticipation that the Disney theme parks are happy places, and, when they return home, they 'discard photographs that remind them of unpleasant experiences and keep photographs that remind them of pleasant experiences' (Sutton 1992: 283). In other words, positive feelings are a post-visit reconstruction that are substantially aided by one's photographs. As a result, Sutton argues, the photographs provide not accurate recollections of a visit but distorted ones.

albums. As Blaikie (2001: 347) observes, in the images themselves and the ways in which they are represented by the museums, the 'apparently raw "reality" of island culture has already been appropriated and ordered'. The problem for the researcher is then one of coming to terms with the image and what it can be taken to mean. As he notes, is the image of a crofter standing by his home suggestive of respectability or of poverty? Also, however the image is construed, should it be seen as having had the function for the photographer of providing a social commentary, or of depicting a disappearing way of life, or of merely providing an image with no obvious subtext? Any or a combination of these different narratives may be applicable, so does this mean that the photograph is a highly limited form of document for the social researcher? While acknowledging the diversity of interpretations that can be bestowed on the images he examined, Blaikie argues that, in his case, they provide a perspective on the emergence of modernity and the sense of loss of a past life, especially in terms of the ways in which they were organized by the museums. Coming to this kind of understanding requires a sensitivity to the contextual nature of images and the variety of interpretations that can be attributed to them.

A related issue concerns the tendency in everyday discourse to give photographs special credibility and to presume that their meaning is transparent. Sayings like 'a picture is worth a thousand words' or 'the camera never lies' are examples of a tendency to valorize images in this way. An illustration of the way in which such views can be misleading can be seen in relation to the photograph in Plate 23.1 taken on 9 July 1937 outside Lord's cricket ground on the opening day of the Eton–Harrow annual

match. This image is widely viewed as a capsule statement of Britain's divided class system. It is known as 'toffs and toughs' and is presumed to show two Etonian boys in uniform standing outside Lord's being looked upon with some bemusement by three working-class 'toughs'. However, a discussion of this photograph by Ian Jack, a *Guardian* journalist, shows that this widely held view is extremely misleading. Quite aside from the fact that the two public school boys were from Harrow, not Eton, they had dressed for a special party that the parents of one of them was putting on following the cricket match that the boys were attending. This was not standard uniform. The boys were waiting for a car to arrive to take them to the party and it was late, possibly accounting for the boys apparently ignoring the 'toughs' and staring into the distance because they were looking out for their transport. Further, the two boys were not 'toffs'—the father of one of them was a professional soldier. Nor were the three boys 'toughs'. They attended a local Church of England school and had been to the dentist that day. They had decided to hang around at Lord's in order to make some money by carrying bags or opening car doors and were indeed successful in that respect. Also, as Jack notes, the boys are not unkempt—they are simply wearing open-necked shirts and informal clothes typical of working-class boys of their day. By contrast, the two Harrow pupils were in special garb rather than what was typical of public-school boys of their day. This fascinating story provides some insight into the reasons why an unquestioning stance on photographs is something that should be discouraged. Ian Jack's article can be found at: www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/mar/23/ian-jack-photograph (accessed 8 November 2010).

Plate 23.1

Toffs and toughs



Copyright: Jimmy Sime/Hulton Archive Getty Images.



Official documents deriving from the state

The state is the source of a great deal of information of potential significance for social researchers. It produces a great deal of statistical information, some of which was touched on in Chapter 14. In addition to such quantitative data, the state is the source of a great deal of textual material of potential interest, such as Acts of Parliament and official reports.

An interesting use of official documents is Turner's (1994) employment of the reports of public inquiries into three disasters, one of which—the fire at the Summerland Leisure Centre, Douglas, Isle of Man, in 1973—is a particular emphasis in his discussion. The report was

published in 1974. Turner was primarily interested in the preconditions of the fire—the factors that were deemed by the inquiry to have led to the fire itself and to the way in which the handling of the incident produced such disastrous consequences (fifty deaths). In his initial analysis, which was based on a grounded theory approach, Turner aimed to produce a theoretical account of the fire's preconditions. Turner describes the process for this and the other two public inquiry reports he examined as one of slowly going through the details of the report. He describes the process as follows:

I asked, for each paragraph, what names or 'labels for ideas' I needed in order to identify those elements, events or notions which were of interest to me in my broad and initially very unfocused concern to develop a theory of disaster preconditions. I then recorded each name or concept label on the top of a 5 inch by 8 inch card, together with a note of the source paragraph, and added further paragraph references to the card as I encountered additional instances of the concept identified. (Turner 1994: 198)

He ended up with 182 of these cards, which provided the raw materials for building his theoretical model. Similar sources were employed by Weick (1990) in his study of the Tenerife plane crash in 1977, in that he used an official report of the Spanish Ministry of Transport and Communication and a further report by the US-based Airline Pilots Association.

Similar kinds of materials but in a different context were employed by Abraham (1994) in connection with his research on the medical drug Opren. The research was concerned with the role of interests and values in scientists' evaluations of the safety of medicines. The author describes his sources as 'publicly available transcripts of the testimonies of scientists, including many employed in the manufacture of Opren, Parliamentary debates, questions and answers in *Hansard*, and leaflets, letters, consultation papers and other documentation disposed by the British regulatory authority in respect of its duties under the 1968 British Medicines

Act' (Abraham 1994: 720). Abraham's research shows that there were inconsistencies in the scientists' testimonies, suggesting that interests play an important role in such situations. He also uses his findings to infer that the notion of a scientific ethos, which has been influential in the sociology of science, has limited applicability in areas of controversy in which interests come to the surface.

In terms of J. Scott's (1990) four criteria, such materials can certainly be seen as authentic and as having meaning (in the sense of being clear and comprehensible to the researcher), but the two other standards require somewhat greater consideration. The question of credibility raises the issue of whether the documentary source is biased. This is exactly the point of Abraham's (1994) research. In other words, such documents can be interesting precisely because of the biases they reveal. Equally, this point suggests that caution is necessary in attempting to treat them as depictions of reality. The issue of representativeness is complicated in that materials like these are in a sense unique, and it is precisely their official or quasi-official character that makes them interesting in their own right. There is also, of course, the question of whether the case itself is representative, but in the context of qualitative research this is not a meaningful question, because no case can be representative in a statistical sense. The issue is one of establishing a cogent theoretical account and possibly examining that account in other contexts. Turner (1994) in fact examined three disasters and noted many common factors that were associated with behaviour in crisis situations.



Official documents deriving from private sources

This is a very heterogeneous group of sources, but one type that has been used a great deal is company documents. Companies (and indeed organizations generally) produce many documents. Some of these are in the public domain, such as annual reports, mission statements, press releases, advertisements, and public relations material in printed form and on the World Wide Web. Other documents are not (or may not be) in the public domain, such as company newsletters, organizational charts, minutes of meetings, memos, internal and external correspondence, manuals for new recruits, and so on. Such

materials are often used by organizational ethnographers as part of their investigations, but the difficulty of gaining access to some organizations means that many researchers have to rely on public-domain documents alone. Even if the researcher is an insider who has gained access to an organization, it may well be that certain documents that are not in the public domain will not be available to him or her. For his study of ICI, Pettigrew (1985; see Research in focus 3.16) was allowed access to company archives, so that, in addition to interviewing, he was allowed to examine 'materials on company strategy and personnel

policy, documents relating to the birth and development of various company OD [organizational development] groups, files documenting the natural history of key organizational changes, and information on the recruitment and training of internal OD consultants, and the use made of external OD consultants' (Pettigrew 1985: 41).

Such information can be very important for researchers conducting case studies of organizations using such methods as participant observation or (as in Pettigrew's case) qualitative interviews. Other writers have relied more or less exclusively on documents. The study of the film director Alfred Hitchcock by Kapsis (1989) employed a combination of personal documents (notably correspondence) and official documents, such as production notes and publicity files (Research in focus 23.4).

Such documents need to be evaluated using Scott's four criteria. As with the materials considered in the previous section, documents deriving from private sources like companies are likely to be authentic and meaningful (in the sense of being clear and comprehensible to the researcher), though this is not to suggest that the analyst of documents should be complacent. Issues of credibility and representativeness are likely to exercise the analyst of documents somewhat more.

People who write documents are likely to have a particular point of view that they want to get across. An interesting illustration of this simple observation is provided by a study of company documentation by Forster (1994). In the course of a study of career development issues in a major British retail company (referred to pseudonymously as TC), Forster carried out an extensive analysis of company documentation relating primarily to human resource management issues, as well as interviews and a questionnaire survey. Because he was able to interview many of the authors of the documents about what they had written, 'both the accuracy of the documents and their authorship could be validated by the individuals who had produced them' (Forster 1994: 155). In other words, the authenticity of the documents was confirmed, and it would seem that credibility was verified as well. However, Forster also tells us that the documents showed up divergent interpretations among different groupings of key events and processes:

One of the clearest themes to emerge was the apparently incompatible interpretations of the same events and processes amongst the three sub-groups within the company—senior executives, HQ personnel staff and regional personnel managers. . . . These documents were not produced deliberately to distort or obscure events or processes being described, but their effect was to do precisely this. (Forster 1994: 160)

In other words, members of the different groupings expressed through the documents certain perspectives that reflected their positions in the organization. Consequently, although authors of the documents could confirm the content of those documents, the latter could not be regarded as 'free from error and distortion', as J. Scott (1990: 6) puts it. Therefore, documents cannot be regarded as providing objective accounts of a state of affairs. They have to be interrogated and examined in the context of other sources of data. As Forster's case suggests, the different stances that are taken up by the authors of documents can be used as a platform for developing insights into the processes and factors that lie behind divergence. In this instance, the documents are interesting in bringing out the role and significance of subcultures within the organization.

Issues of representativeness are likely to loom large in most contexts of this kind. Did Forster have access to a totally comprehensive set of documents? It could be that some had been destroyed or that he was not allowed access to certain documents that were regarded as sensitive. The case of the documents relating to Alfred Hitchcock is particularly interesting in this regard (see Research in focus 23.4). Hitchcock or possibly others may not have deposited documents that were less than favourable to his image. Since Kapsis's article is concerned with reputation building and particularly with the active part played by Hitchcock and others in the construction of his reputation as a significant film-maker, the part played by documents that might have been less than supportive of this reputation would be of considerable importance. This is not to say that such documents necessarily exist but that doubts are bound to surface whenever there is uncertainty about the representativeness of sources.



Research in focus 23.4

Constructing Alfred Hitchcock: personal and official documents

The focus of Kapsis's (1989) study of Alfred Hitchcock is the way in which a reputation is fashioned in popular culture. In particular, he emphasizes the way in which Hitchcock's reputation as a director changed in the 1960s and beyond from that of a popular entertainer to that of a celebrated maker of highly significant films. Kapsis's analysis emphasizes the importance of sponsors, such as the influential French director François Truffaut, in the process of re-evaluation of his work, as well as the part played by Hitchcock himself. The main source was the director's personal files, which had been lodged with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. This collection is made up of materials that could be described as both personal and official documents, as well as other sources:

- scripts, production notes, and publicity files;
- correspondence, especially between Hitchcock and Truffaut and with various arts organizations;
- fifty-two hours of taped interviews with Truffaut;
- speeches delivered between 1960 and 1975;
- newspaper and magazine clippings, especially reviews;
- interviews by Kapsis with various people associated with Hitchcock.



Mass-media outputs

Newspapers, magazines, television programmes, films, and other mass media are potential sources for social scientific analysis. Of course, we have encountered these kinds of source before when exploring content analysis in Chapter 13. In addition to mass-media outputs being explored using a quantitative form of data analysis like content analysis, such sources can also be examined so that their qualitative nature is preserved. Typically, such analysis entails searching for themes in the sources that are examined, but see the discussion on analysing documents below for a more detailed examination of this issue.

In Chapter 13, Beharrell's (1993) content analysis of AIDS/HIV in the British press was cited on several occasions as an illustration of different aspects of content analysis. However, in this particular publication, the content analysis served mainly as a backcloth to a detailed investigation of themes in media representations of the risk of heterosexual transmission of HIV. During the period of press coverage that Beharrell investigated, a key component of the British government's health education strategy concerning HIV transmission was

to demonstrate the risks associated with heterosexual transmission and especially the heightened risks of unprotected sex. Beharrell shows through an examination of such sources as editorials and articles by specialist medical reporters that three newspapers—the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail*, and the *Daily Express*—were consistently opposed to the government's campaign. For example, the *Daily Mail*'s editorials criticized the strategy on the grounds that it did not target sufficiently the high-risk groups—homosexuals and intravenous drug-users. By contrast, the *Daily Mirror* was broadly supportive of the campaign. For example, a feature article on the occasion of World AIDS Day in 1988 proclaimed: 'And what we must never forget is that there is still no cure or vaccine for AIDS. So the way to stop its spread is through information, education and changes in human behaviour. Only then will there be any hope of controlling this deadly scourge' (*Daily Mirror*, 1 Dec. 1988; quoted in Beharrell 1993: 226). The broadsheet newspapers, such as *The Times*, the *Independent*, and the *Guardian*, were, like the *Daily Mirror*, broadly supportive of the government's strategy of a general educational programme.

However, Beharrell also points to internal contradictions in newspapers' reporting, such as references to articles in tabloids like the *Sun* in the summer of 1991 warning of the risks of HIV infection among British tourists going abroad for sun, sea, and sex holidays. Research in focus 23.7 provides a further illustration of the qualitative interpretation of newspaper articles.

As Beharrell points out, his research shows that an examination of reporting like this brings out the difficulty of referring to the 'press' in an undifferentiated way, and even conventional distinctions between tabloids and broadsheets need to be treated with some caution following such evidence. It also points to some of the contradictions in reporting. A content analysis might have been able to bring out aspects of this set of findings, but the employment of a more fine-grained analysis allows a greater sensitivity to the nature and content of specific themes. Magazines provide similar potential, as the example in Research in focus 23.5 suggests.

Similar observations can frequently be made about films. Aitken (1998) has analysed five British documentary films made between 1929 and 1939. All the films are about or touch substantially upon work and organizations. As such, they could be regarded as telling us a great deal in a graphic way about these themes in the inter-war years. For example, one of the five films—*Night Mail* (1936)—provides an insight into the Royal Mail train delivery service and concentrates on the operation during one day and night. While a shift in emphasis was apparent over the years the films were made, Aitken notes that they reveal a celebration of manual and craft skills but provide a less enthusiastic or at least ambivalent depiction of administrative routines and organizational structures. As such, the films cannot be regarded as providing a neutral record of work and organizations during this period. Instead, they probably tell us more about the ambivalence towards large corporations during their emergence over this period.



Research in focus 23.5 Aberdeen football fanzines

Giulianotti (1997) has written about the fanzines that emerged in connection with Aberdeen football club, which was one of the clubs that were the focus of his ethnographic research (see Research in focus 19.2). He shows how the fanzines, some of which were defunct by the time of his analysis, play a role in the creation of a sense of identity among supporters, especially during a period of footballing decline. He shows, for example, that 'the fanzines combine the more traditional sense of cultural differences from the rest of Scotland with the North-East's self-deprecating, often self-defeating humour' (Giulianotti 1997: 231). An illustration of this tendency is through the medium of the sheep. Rival fans insist that Aberdeen supporters have an interest in this creature that extends beyond its potential as a provider of food and wool. This is revealed in the repetitive chant of rival supporters: 'Sheepshagging bastards, You're only [etc.] ...' (Giulianotti 1997: 220). This allegation of bestiality is turned by the supporters upon themselves in their fanzines, so that the sheep is frequently used in cartoons, and stories about sheep frequent their pages.

Authenticity issues are sometimes difficult to ascertain in the case of mass-media outputs. While the outputs can usually be deemed to be genuine, the authorship of articles is often unclear (for example, editorials, some magazine articles), so that it is difficult to know whether the account can be relied upon as being written by someone in a position to provide an accurate version. Credibility is frequently an issue, but in fact, as the examples used in this section show, it is often the uncovering of error or distortion that is the objective of the analysis. Representativeness is rarely an issue for analy-

ses of newspaper or magazine articles, since the corpus from which a sample has been drawn is usually ascertainable, especially when a wide range of newspapers is employed, as in Beharrell's (1993) investigation. However, it is difficult to know whether the films analysed by Aitken (1998) are typical. Finally, the evidence is usually clear and comprehensible but may require considerable awareness of contextual factors, such as the need for Giulianotti to be aware of the symbolic significance of sheep to Aberdeen football supporters (see Research in focus 23.5).



Virtual documents

There is one final type of document that ought to be mentioned—documents that appear on the Internet. The vastness of the Internet and its growing accessibility make it a potent source of documents for both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Issues involved in the analysis of such documents are discussed in Chapter 28. Two kinds of virtual documents tend to be the focus of attention: websites and Internet postings to message boards or forums. An example of the former is the content analysis by Dorsey et al. (2004) of websites by companies promoting ecotourism holidays—that is, ecologically sensitive tourism. They argue that the Internet has played a significant role in promoting these newer forms of tourism and were interested in the ways in which they are promoted on websites. Dorsey et al. submitted the websites they found to a detailed narrative analysis (see Chapter 24) guided by two research questions. First, do the companies advertising these tours on their websites do so in a manner consistent with the discourse of ecotourism and sustainable development? Second, does the online strategy of advertising these tours differ from traditional forms? Regarding the first research question, the researchers found that only two of the seven websites represented their tours in a manner consistent with the discourse of ecotourism and sustainable development. The others missed key elements of the discourse. As

regards the second research question, the researchers found that there was little difference between online advertising of such tourism and what had been found by previous researchers who had examined the advertising of ecotourism in traditional media. As an example of the analysis of Internet postings, it would be useful to look back to Research in focus 13.3, which reports two studies that examined illness-related websites and postings using a combination of quantitative and qualitative styles of content analysis.

There is clearly huge potential with the Internet as a source of documents, but Scott's criteria need to be kept in mind. First, authenticity: anyone could set up a website, so that such matters as financial advice may be given by someone who is not an authority. Second, credibility: we need to be aware of possible distortions. For example, if we were studying websites advertising holidays, we need to be aware of the distortions that may arise in the interests of selling. In the case of the research by Dorsey et al. reported above, that of course was precisely the point. Third, given the constant flux of the Internet, it is doubtful whether we could ever know how representative websites are on a certain topic. Finally, websites are notorious for a kind of Webspeak, so that it may be difficult to comprehend what is being said without considerable insider knowledge.



The reality of documents

An issue that has attracted attention only relatively recently and that has implications for the interpretation of documents (the focus of the next section) is that of the status of documents. It is clearly tempting to assume that documents reveal something about an underlying social reality, so that the documents that an organization generates (minutes of meetings, newsletters, mission statements, job definitions, and so on) are viewed as representations of the reality of that organization. In other words, we might take the view that such documents tell us something about what goes on in that organization and will help us to uncover such things as its culture or

ethos. According to such a view, documents are windows onto social and organizational realities.

However, some writers have expressed scepticism about the extent to which documents can be viewed in these terms. Rather than view documents as ways of gaining access to an underlying reality, writers like Atkinson and Coffey (2011) argue that documents should be viewed as a distinct level of 'reality' in their own right. Atkinson and Coffey argue that documents should be examined in terms of, on the one hand, the context in which they were produced and, on the other hand, their implied readership. When viewed in this way, documents

are significant for what they were supposed to accomplish and who they are written for. They are written in order to convey an impression, one that will be favourable to the authors and those whom they represent. Moreover, any document should be viewed as linked to other documents, because invariably they refer to and/or are a response to other documents. Other documents form part of the context or background to the writing of a document. Atkinson and Coffey refer to the interconnectedness of documents as *inter-textuality*.

The minutes of a meeting in an organization might be the kind of document that would interest a social scientist. On the face of it, they are a record of such things as: issues raised at the meeting; the discussion of those issues; views of the participants; and actions to be taken. As such, they might be deemed interesting for a social researcher for their ability to reveal such things as the culture of the organization or section responsible for the minutes, its preoccupations, and possible disputes among the meeting participants. However, precisely because the minutes are a document that are to be read not only by participants but also by others (members of other departments or of other organizations or in the case of a public-sector organization the minutes may be accessed by the public under the Freedom of Information Act), they are likely to be written with prospective scrutiny by others in mind. Disagreements may be suppressed and actions to be taken may reflect a desire to demonstrate that important issues are to be addressed rather than because of a genuine desire for acting on them. Also, the minutes are likely to be connected either explicitly or implicitly to other documents of that organization, such as previous minutes, mission statements, job definitions, organizational regulations, and various documents external to the organization (for example, legislation). Further, following Atkinson and Coffey's suggestions, the minutes should be examined for the ways in which language is employed to convey the messages that are contained.

Atkinson and Coffey's central message is that documents have a distinctive ontological status, in that they form a separate reality, which they refer to as a 'documentary reality', and should not be taken to be 'transparent representations' of an underlying organizational or social reality. They go on to write: 'We cannot . . . learn through written records alone how an organization actually operates day by day. Equally, we cannot treat records—however "official"—as firm evidence of what they report' (Atkinson and Coffey 2011: 79).

Atkinson and Coffey's central point is that documents need to be recognized for what they are—namely, texts written with distinctive purposes in mind, and not as

simply reflecting reality. This means that, if the researcher wishes to employ documents as a means of understanding aspects of an organization and its operations, it is likely that he or she will need to buttress an analysis of documents with other sources of data. In this context, it is interesting to reflect on Atkinson and Coffey's illustrative examination of a document—Cardiff University's submission to the Sociology Panel for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The research of UK universities is periodically assessed by panels organized around disciplines. It is a major feature of life in UK universities. Each unit of assessment (in this case Sociology) submits a document that records the activities of that unit and the publications of its members. The document and in particular the publications are then assessed by panels of peers. Two particular points from Atkinson and Coffey's analysis are especially noteworthy. First, while the English employed is largely uncomplicated, the significance of the document and its nuances would be lost on most people who do not have a fair amount of inside knowledge of UK higher education and the importance of the exercise within it. Readers can make sense of these RAE documents in terms of what they tell us about academic life in UK universities and the role of external audits within them only if they are insiders to that process. They are like participant observers. As such, they are able to bolster their examination of the documents by drawing on their experiences of modern university life. In other words, insiders have additional data on which they can draw in helping them to understand what the documents reveal about UK universities and modern audit culture. Thus, if we want to treat documents as telling us something about an underlying reality, we are likely to need to employ other sources of data regarding that reality and the contexts within which the documents are produced (see Research in focus 23.6 for an example). A similar point can be made in relation to the study by O'Reilly et al. of REC letters presented in Research in focus 22.3. As the authors note: 'Regardless of what has happened during the REC meeting, the decision letter goes on to create its own "documentary reality"' (O'Reilly et al. 2009: 257). The letter has a life of its own and requires for its understanding other documents (such as REC guidelines and final decision outcomes) and the backcloth of an increasingly tight regime of ethical practice in the social sciences.

Second, the document is rhetorically designed to 'do something'. It is designed to present the Cardiff department in the best possible light using the nuanced language and signifiers of higher education reputation. As Prior (2008) observes, documents are typically viewed

by social researchers as resources to be worked on and for their substantive meaning to be unravelled, perhaps using techniques introduced in this chapter and in Chapters 13 and 24. At the same time, documents are written to get something done and as such are parts of chains of action that are potential research topics in their own right. Thus, the Cardiff submission's goal of representing its reputation in the best possible light has to be viewed in relation to the evidence supplied to support

its arguments (intertextuality) and the outcomes of the exercise as well as the implications of those outcomes for the department's continued success. This orientation to documents represents a shift in how they are conceived for research purposes. For many researchers, their content will continue to be the main focus of attention, but it is also important to be attuned to the significance of documents in terms of the parts they play in organizations and elsewhere.



Research in focus 23.6

Documents and disaster

Diane Vaughan (1996) wrote an extremely highly regarded book on the *Challenger* accident. This disaster occurred in January 1986 when the Space Shuttle *Challenger* burst into flames just after its launch. Vaughan had been interested in what she calls the 'dark side' of organizations and wanted to use this dreadful incident as a case study for understanding the chain of individual and organization factors that preceded and led to the decision to launch the shuttle in spite of evidence of possible problems. A huge report was written by the Presidential Commission that was appointed to investigate the accident. This report might have been considered sufficient to provide insights into the issues in which she was interested, but Vaughan also examined various other sources: an archive of NASA documents; other investigations of the accident; US House of Representatives hearing transcripts; transcripts of 160 interviews with people involved with *Challenger* conducted by government investigators; risk-assessment documents that were solicited by Vaughan under the US Freedom of Information Act; and numerous interviews conducted by Vaughan herself (Vaughan 2004).

However, as Vaughan (2006) points out, examining documents like Presidential Commission reports can be extremely illuminating about the kinds of issues that they emphasize and the kinds of ways in which the issues are framed. This is precisely the point Atkinson and Coffey (2011) make in connection with the notion that documents provide a distinctive take on reality in their own right. Vaughan (2006) examined three Commission Reports: the *Challenger* report; the *Columbia* Accident Investigation Board Report, which dealt with another space shuttle disaster that took place in February 2003; and the 9/11 Commission Report. She shows that each report was shaped by a dominant frame, which was respectively: an 'accident investigation frame'; a 'sociological frame'; and an 'historical/war frame' (2006: 304). Further, she notes that the 9/11 report located causation in what she calls 'regulatory failure' (2006: 300), which is to do with problems with the activities of the agencies charged with upholding national security. An effect of that attribution of causation is to absolve the President and to some extent US foreign policy of responsibility. This examination of documents in their own right implies that they can tell us about such things as how those responsible for reporting officially on major incidents construe the background and causal precedents of those incidents. As such, the reports are interesting as much for where responsibility is *not* perceived as lying. As Atkinson and Coffey remind us, what they cannot tell us is what actually led up to them.



Interpreting documents

Although it means straying into areas that are relevant to the next chapter, this section will briefly consider the

question of how, if you are not using content analysis, you interpret documents. Three possible approaches are



Research in focus 23.7

Using critical discourse analysis to interpret newspaper articles

Critical discourse analysis was introduced in Chapter 22 as an approach to the examination of language and its use that can be applied to a variety of different materials. Teo (2000) employed it in relation to news reporting in Australian newspapers. Teo's focus of interest was the ways in which racism surfaced or was neutralized in two of the main Sydney newspapers. He emphasized in particular nine articles to do with 5T, a young Vietnamese gang that is relatively openly involved in drug-dealing in a suburb of Sydney. Critical discourse analysis was a suitable approach to interpreting these documents because of its capacity to provide insights into the way in which language use produces and legitimates racism in the press. As Teo observes, the 'critical' element in critical discourse analysis invites attention to the ideological basis of a discourse that naturalizes and thereby renders acceptable stances like racism. He notes a variety of mechanisms that are employed to convey a particular position with regard to racism and the police service's war on drugs. For example, Teo refers to the linguistic device that he refers to as *generalization*, which occurs when a cluster of characteristics of an identified group of individuals is extended (that is, generalized) to a wider set of individuals. For example, he finds:

In the newspaper discourse under analysis, we observe a *generalization* of the crimes of the 5T . . . to a progressively wider group of people (Vietnamese, Southeast Asians and Asians). References to 'Vietnamese' and 'Asian' appears so consistently and frequently in relation to criminal activities of the 5T that it becomes almost an endemic part of the drug culture of Australia. (Teo 2000: 16)

Examples quoted include: 'three Vietnamese men gunned down', 'the tall youth of Asian appearance', and 'five other youths of Asian appearance' (Teo 2000: 17). Here, then, the use of a critical discourse analysis approach to these documents provides a means of gaining insight into the ideological foundations of racism.

outlined: qualitative content analysis; semiotics; and hermeneutics. In addition to these, discourse analysis, which was covered in Chapter 22, has been employed as an approach for analysing documents. Research in focus 23.7 provides an example of the use of critical discourse analysis in relation to the interpretation of one kind of document reviewed in this chapter—newspaper articles.

Qualitative content analysis

This is probably the most prevalent approach to the qualitative analysis of documents. It comprises a searching-out of underlying themes in the materials being analysed and can be discerned in several of the studies referred to earlier, such as Beharrell (1993), Giulianotti (1997), and Aitken (1998). The processes through which the themes are extracted is often not specified in detail. The extracted themes are usually illustrated—for example, with brief quotations from a newspaper article or magazine. Seale (2002: 109) examined newspaper reports in which people with cancer are portrayed. One of the phases of his analysis entailed an NVivo coding exercise,

in which sections of text concerning themes of interest were identified and retrieved'. He was especially interested in gender differences in how sufferers are represented and shows, for example, that stories about men were much more likely to include certain themes, such as how a person's character is important in helping him deal with the disease. The procedures adopted by Turner (1994) in connection with his research on the Summerland disaster are an example of the search for themes in texts, although Turner provided greater detail about what he did than is often the case. Research in focus 23.8 provides an example of a thematic analysis that illustrates some of its ingredients.

Altheide (1996) has outlined an approach that he calls **ethnographic content analysis** (which he contrasts with quantitative content analysis of the kind outlined in Chapter 13). Altheide's approach (which he refers to as ECA) represents a codification of certain procedures that might be viewed as typical of the kind of qualitative content analysis on which many of the studies referred to so far are based. He describes his approach as differing from traditional quantitative content analysis in that the



Research in focus 23.8

Discerning themes in cartoons

The study in this Research in focus feature relates to an unusual kind of document—cartoons. This is unusual because most documents on which social researchers carry out analyses are textual rather than visual. Nonetheless, the study provides an interesting illustration of the extraction of themes from documents.

As a component of their study of the Canadian refugee system, Phillips and Hardy (2002: 75–8; see also Hardy and Phillips 1999) analysed 127 cartoons that appeared in Canadian newspapers in the 1987–9 period. The cartoons were connected with the general issues of immigration and refugees. They describe this collection of cartoons as a dataset that was waiting for a research question, implying that they had collected the cartoons without any guiding principles, other than that they should relate to immigration and refugees. On examining the cartoons, they began to appreciate that the cartoons represented broader societal constructions of the immigrant, and this realization informed their analyses of the documents into themes. Early on in their examination of the cartoons, they realized that most cartoons relate to one or more of the following four objects:

1. the refugee;
2. government;
3. the immigration system; and
4. the public (this fourth category was not a common one).

Further analysis revealed that in relation to each of these objects distinctive themes could be discerned. Each of these themes reflects the different ways that each of the four objects was represented in the cartoons. For example, seven themes could be discerned in the ways in which the immigration system was represented in the cartoons:

1. as inconsistent (23);
2. as inadequate (17);
3. as too tough (12);
4. as too lenient (10);
5. as too slow (7);
6. as gullible (7);
7. as honourable (1).

Each theme was accompanied by a definition. For example, the immigration system as inconsistent was defined as: 'Certain groups, such as illegal immigrants, fraudulent refugees, or individuals with political connections, are treated preferentially' (Phillips and Hardy 2002: 77). Hardy and Phillips (1999) also provide data on the frequency with which each of these themes occurred. The figures in parentheses above represent the number of cartoons that depicted each of the themes relating to the immigration system.

Hardy and Phillips (1999) provide some illustrative cartoons. For example, the immigration system as too tough is illustrated by an apparent refugee family of a couple and young child arriving at a door with the sign 'Immigration Canada Refugee Assessment'. Instead of a welcome mat in front of the door is a mat inscribed 'GET LOST'.

This research was conducted within a discourse analysis orientation, which is revealed in the authors' interest in the way in which the category of refugee is constructed through discourse and images and how both governments and non-governmental organizations with an interest in immigrants and refugees drew upon these discursive resources. However, the main point is that thematic analysis is a common approach to analysing documents (and indeed interview transcripts) and that it can be applied in relation to different kinds of orientation to qualitative data.

researcher is constantly revising the themes or categories that are distilled from the examination of documents. As he puts it:

ECA follows a recursive and reflexive movement between concept development–sampling–data, collection–data, coding–data, and analysis–interpretation. The aim is to be systematic and analytic but not rigid. Categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge during the study, including an orientation to *constant discovery* and *constant comparison* of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances. (Altheide 1996: 16; emphases in original)

Thus, with ECA there is much more movement back and forth between conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and interpretation than is the case with the kind of content analysis described in Chapter 13. Quantitative content analysis typically entails applying predefined categories to the sources; ECA employs some initial categorization, but there is greater potential for refinement of those categories and the generation of new ones. In addition, ECA emphasizes the context within which documents are generated, so that a study of newspaper reporting of violence requires an appreciation of new organizations and the work of journalists (Altheide 2004).

Altheide (2004) describes the steps involved as requiring the researcher to:

- generate a research question;
- become familiar with the context within which the documents were/are generated;
- become familiar with a small number of documents (6–10);
- generate some categories that will guide the collection of data and draft a schedule for collecting the data in terms of the generated categories;
- test the schedule by using it for collecting data from a number of documents;
- revise the schedule and select further cases to sharpen it up.

Once this process has been gone through, the schedule can be employed for the collection of data from documents.

Qualitative content analysis as a strategy of searching for themes in one's data lies at the heart of the coding approaches that are often employed in the analysis of

qualitative data and as such will be encountered again in the next chapter.

Semiotics

Semiotics is invariably referred to as the 'science of signs'. It is an approach to the analysis of symbols in everyday life and as such can be employed in relation not only to documentary sources but also to all kinds of other data because of its commitment to treating phenomena as texts. The main terms employed in semiotics are:

- the **sign**—that is, something that stands for something else;
- the sign is made up of: a *signifier* and the *signified*;
- the *signifier* is the thing that points to an underlying meaning (the term *sign vehicle* is sometimes used instead of *signifier*);
- the *signified* is the meaning to which the signifier points;
- a **denotative** *meaning* is the manifest or more obvious meaning of a signifier and as such indicates its function;
- a *sign-function* is an object that denotes a certain function;
- a **connotative** *meaning* is a meaning associated with a certain social context that is in addition to its denotative meaning;
- *polysemy* refers to a quality of signs—namely, that they are always capable of being interpreted in many ways;
- the *code* is the generalized meaning that interested parties may seek to instil in a sign; a code is sometimes also called a *sign system*.

Semiotics is concerned to uncover the hidden meanings that reside in texts as broadly defined. Consider, by way of illustration, the curriculum vitae (CV) in academic life. The typical CV that an academic will produce contains such features as: personal details; education; previous and current posts; administrative responsibilities and experience; teaching experience; research experience; research grants acquired; and publications. We can treat the CV as a system of interlocking signifiers that signify at the level of denotative meaning a summary of the individual's experience (its sign function) and at the connotative level an indication of an individual's value, particularly in connection with his or her prospective employability. Each CV is capable of being interpreted in different ways, as anyone who has ever sat in on a short-listing meeting for a lectureship can testify, and is

therefore polysemic, but there is a code whereby certain attributes of CVs are seen as especially desirable and are therefore less contentious in terms of the attribution of meaning. Indeed, applicants for posts know this latter point and devise their CVs to amplify the desired qualities so that the CV becomes an autobiographical practice for the presentation of self, as Miller and Morgan (1993) have suggested.

Research in focus 23.9 provides an illustration of a study from a semiotic perspective of Disneyland as a text. The chief strength of semiotics lies in its invitation to the analyst to try to see beyond and beneath the apparent ordinariness of everyday life and its manifestations. The

main difficulty one often feels with the fruits of a semiotic analysis is that, although we are invariably given a compelling exposition of a facet of the quotidian, it is difficult to escape a sense of the arbitrariness of the analysis provided. However, in all probability this sensation is unfair to the approach, because the results of a semiotic analysis are probably no more arbitrary than any interpretation of documentary materials or any other data, such as a thematic, qualitative content analysis of the kind described in the previous section. Indeed, it would be surprising if we were not struck by a sense of arbitrariness in interpretation, in view of the principle of polysemy that lies at the heart of semiotics.



Research in focus 23.9

A semiotic Disneyland

Gottdiener (1982; 1997: 108–15) has proposed that Disneyland in Los Angeles, California, can be fruitfully analysed through a semiotic analysis. In so doing, he was treating Disneyland as a text. One component of his analysis is that Disneyland's meaning 'is revealed by its oppositions with the quotidian—the alienated everyday life of residents of L.A.' (1982: 148). He identifies through this principle nine *sign systems* that entail a contrast between the park and its surrounding environment: transportation; food; clothing; shelter; entertainment; social control; economics; politics; and family. Thus, the first of these sign systems—transportation—reveals a contrast between the Disneyland visitor as pedestrian (walk in a group; efficient mass transportation, which is fun) and as passenger (car is necessary; poor mass transportation; danger on the congested freeways). A further component of his analysis entails an analysis of the connotations of the different 'lands' that make up the park. He suggests that each land is associated as a signifier with signifiers of capitalism, as follows:

- Frontierland—predatory capital
- Adventureland—colonialism/imperialism
- Tomorrowland—state capital
- New Orleans—venture capital
- Main Street—family capital. (Gottdiener 1982: 156)

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics refers to an approach that was originally devised in relation to the understanding or interpretation of texts and of theological texts in particular. It has been influential in the general formulation of interpretivism as an epistemology (see Chapter 2, where the idea of hermeneutics was briefly encountered) and is more or less synonymous with Weber's notion of *Verstehen*. The central idea behind hermeneutics is that the analyst of a text must seek to bring out the meanings of a text from the perspective of its author. This will entail attention to the social and historical context within which the text was produced. An approach to the analysis of texts like

qualitative content analysis can be hermeneutic when it is sensitive to the context within which texts were produced. Hermeneutics is seen by its modern advocates as a strategy that has potential in relation both to texts as documents and to social actions and other non-documentary phenomena.

Phillips and Brown (1993) and Forster (1994) separately identify an approach to the interpretation of company documents that they describe as a *critical hermeneutic* approach. A hermeneutic approach, because of its emphasis on the location of interpretation within a specific social and historical context, would seem to represent an invitation to ensure that the analyst of texts is fully conversant with that context. As such, the approach is

likely to entail the collection and analysis of data that will allow an understanding in context to be forged. As noted previously, Forster's study of the company referred to as TC included interviews with senior managers and a questionnaire survey. For their study of the corporate image advertisements of a Canadian company that produces synthetic crude oil, Phillips and Brown also employed a large database of magazine and newspaper articles relating to the company, which supplied the authors with additional documentary materials. Forster's critical hermeneutic analysis entailed the interrogation of the documents and the extraction of themes from them by reference to his knowledge of the organizational context within which the documents and the people and events within them were located.

Phillips and Brown's (1993) somewhat more formal approach entailed the examination of the advertisements in terms of three 'moments'.

1. *The social-historical moment*, which involves 'an examination of the producer of the text, its intentional recipient, its referent in the world [i.e. what it refers to], and the context in which the text is produced, transmitted, and received' (1993: 1558).
2. *The formal moment*, which involves 'a formal analysis of the structural and conventional aspects of the text' (1993: 1563). This means that the texts must be examined in terms of the constituent parts of each text and the writing conventions employed. This phase can involve the use of any of several techniques, such as semiotics or discourse analysis (see

Chapter 20). Phillips and Brown used the former of these.

3. *The interpretation-reinterpretation moment*, which 'involves the interpretation of the results of the first two moments' (1993: 1567); in other words, they are synthesized.

Through this strategy, Phillips and Brown show, for example, the ways in which the corporate image advertisements constitute an attempt to mobilize support for the company's activities from government (and from among the public, who were unlikely to be familiar with the company) at a time of intense competition for funding, and to ward off environmental legislation. The approach has points of affinity with the idea of the active audience perspective, in that there is an emphasis on the reception of texts and as such the notion that there may be a plurality of interpretations of them.

The critical hermeneutic approach thus can draw on practices associated with qualitative content analysis and can fuse them with ways of formally approaching texts, such as semiotics. What is crucial is the linkage that is made between understanding the text from the point of view of the author and the social and historical context of its production. Indeed, in many respects, for a hermeneutic approach, the latter is a precondition of the former. Its appeal to qualitative researchers is that it is an approach to the analysis of documents (and indeed other data) that explicitly draws on two central tenets of the qualitative research strategy: an emphasis on the point of view of the author of the text and a sensitivity to context.



Checklist

Evaluating documents

- ☐ Can you answer the following questions?
 - ☐ Who produced the document?
 - ☐ Why was the document produced?
 - ☐ Was the person or group that produced the document in a position to write authoritatively about the subject or issue?
 - ☐ Is the material genuine?
 - ☐ Did the person or group have an axe to grind and if so can you identify a particular slant?
 - ☐ Is the document typical of its kind and if not is it possible to establish how untypical it is and in what ways?
 - ☐ Is the meaning of the document clear?

- ☐ Can you corroborate the events or accounts presented in the document?
- ☐ Are there different interpretations of the document from the one you offer and if so what are they and why have you discounted them?



Key points

- Documents constitute a very heterogeneous set of sources of data, which include personal documents, official documents from both the state and private sources, and the mass media.
- Such materials can be the focus of both quantitative and qualitative enquiry, but the emphasis in this chapter has been upon the latter.
- Documents of the kinds considered may be in printed, visual, digital, or indeed any other retrievable format.
- Criteria for evaluating the quality of documents are: authenticity; credibility; representativeness; and meaning. The relevance of these criteria varies somewhat according to the kind of document being assessed.
- There are several ways of analysing documents within qualitative research. In this chapter we have covered qualitative content analysis, semiotics, and hermeneutics.



Questions for review

- What is meant by a document?
- What are Scott's four criteria for assessing documents?

Personal documents

- Outline the different kinds of personal documents.
- How do they fare in terms of Scott's criteria?
- What might be the role of personal documents in relation to the life history or biographical method?
- What uses can family photographs have in social research?

Official documents deriving from the state

- What do the studies by Abraham (1994) and Turner (1994) suggest in terms of the potential for social researchers of official documents deriving from the state?
- How do such documents fare in terms of Scott's criteria?

Official documents deriving from private sources

- What kinds of documents might be considered official documents deriving from private sources?
- How do such documents fare in terms of Scott's criteria?

Mass-media outputs

- What kinds of documents are mass-media outputs?
- How do such documents fare in terms of Scott's criteria?

Virtual documents

- Do Internet documents and other virtual outputs raise special problems in terms of assessing them from the point of view of Scott's criteria?

The reality of documents

- In what sense can documents provide evidence on which social researchers can draw as data?

Interpreting documents

- What is thematic analysis?
- How does qualitative content analysis differ from the kind of content analysis discussed in Chapter 12?
- What is a sign? How central is it to semiotics?
- What is the difference between denotative meaning and connotative meaning?
- What is a hermeneutic approach to documents?
- What lessons can be learned from the studies by Phillips and Brown (1993) and by Forster (1994) concerning the potential uses of a hermeneutic approach?

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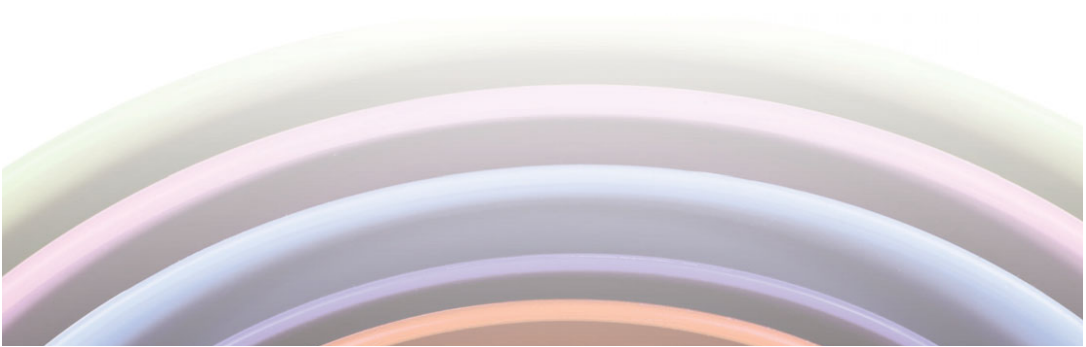
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24

Qualitative data analysis

Chapter outline

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Chapter guide

Because qualitative data deriving from interviews or participant observation typically take the form of a large corpus of unstructured textual material, they are not straightforward to analyse. Moreover, unlike quantitative data analysis, clear-cut rules about how qualitative data analysis should be carried out have not been developed. In this chapter, some general approaches to qualitative data analysis will be examined, along with *coding*, which is the main feature of most of these approaches. The chapter explores:

- *analytic induction* as a general strategy of qualitative data analysis;
- *grounded theory* as a general strategy of qualitative data analysis; this is probably the most prominent of the general approaches to qualitative data analysis; the chapter examines its main features, processes, and outcomes, along with some of the criticisms that are sometimes levelled at the approach;
- *coding* as a key process in grounded theory and in approaches to qualitative data analysis more generally; it is the focus of an extended discussion in terms of what it entails and some of the limitations of a reliance on coding;
- the criticism that is sometimes made of coding in relation to qualitative data—namely, that it tends to fragment data; the idea of *narrative analysis* is introduced as an approach to data analysis that is gaining a growing following and that does not result in data fragmentation;
- the possibility of conducting a secondary analysis of other researchers' qualitative data is examined.

Introduction

One of the main difficulties with qualitative research is that it very rapidly generates a large, cumbersome database because of its reliance on prose in the form of such media as field notes, interview transcripts, or documents. Miles (1979) has described qualitative data as an 'attractive nuisance', because of the attractiveness of its richness but the difficulty of finding analytic paths through that richness. The researcher must guard against being captivated by the richness of the data collected, so that there is a failure to give the data wider significance for the social sciences. In other words, it is crucial to guard against failing to carry out a true analysis. This means that you must protect yourself against the condition Lofland (1971: 18) once called 'analytic interruptus'.

Yet, finding a path through the thicket of prose that makes up your data is not an easy matter and is baffling to many researchers confronting such data for the first time. 'What do I do with it now?' is a common refrain. In large part, this is because, unlike the analysis of quantitative data, there are few well-established and widely accepted rules for the analysis of qualitative data. Although learning the techniques of quantitative data analysis may seem painful at the time, they do give you an unambiguous set of rules about how to handle your

data. You still have to interpret your analyses, but at least there are relatively clear rules for getting to that point. Qualitative data analysis has not reached this degree of codification of analytic procedures, and many writers would argue that this is not necessarily desirable anyway (see Bryman and Burgess 1994b on this point). What *can* be provided are broad guidelines (see Okely 1994), and it is in the spirit of this suggestion that this chapter has been written.

This chapter has two main sections.

1. *General strategies of qualitative data analysis*. In this section, I consider two approaches to data analysis—**analytic induction** and **grounded theory**.
2. *Basic operations in qualitative data analysis*. This section entails a consideration in particular of **coding**.

In addition, I consider **narrative analysis**, which is an approach to qualitative data analysis, which is to a certain extent different in style from the emphasis on coding that can be seen in both grounded theory and the basic operations typically used by qualitative researchers, and the secondary analysis of qualitative data.

In the next chapter, the use of computers in qualitative data analysis will be outlined.



General strategies of qualitative data analysis

This section considers two strategies of analysis—analytic induction and grounded theory. They are probably the most frequently cited approaches, though others do exist (e.g. R. Williams 1976; Hycner 1985). By a general strategy of qualitative data analysis, I simply mean a framework that is meant to guide the analysis of data. As we will see, one of the ways in which qualitative and quantitative data analysis sometimes differ is that, with the latter, analysis invariably occurs after your data have been collected. However, as noted in Chapter 17, general approaches like grounded theory (and analytic induction) are often described as *iterative*—that is, there is a repetitive interplay between the collection and analysis of data. This means that analysis starts after some of the

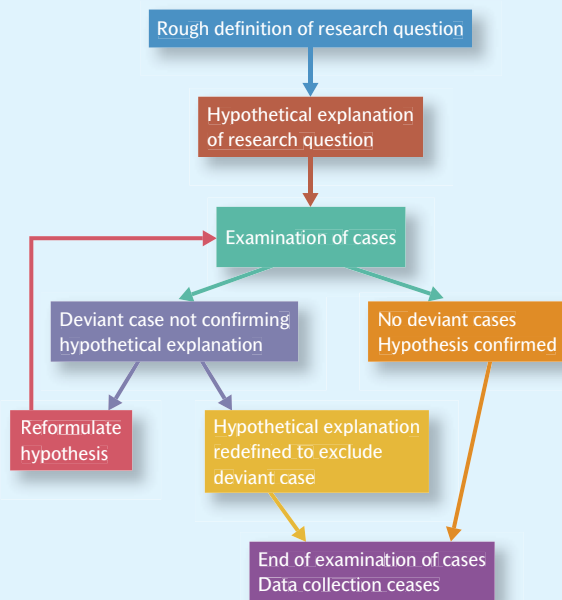
data have been collected, and the implications of that analysis then shape the next steps in the data-collection process. Consequently, while grounded theory and analytic induction are described as strategies of analysis, they can also be viewed as strategies for the *collection* of data.

Analytic induction

The main steps in analytic induction are outlined in Figure 24.1. Analytic induction (see Key concept 24.1) begins with a rough definition of a research question, proceeds to a hypothetical explanation of that problem, and then continues on to the collection of data (examination

Figure 24.1

The process of analytic induction





Key concept 24.1

What is analytic induction?

Analytic induction is an approach to the analysis of data in which the researcher seeks universal explanations of phenomena by pursuing the collection of data until no cases that are inconsistent with a hypothetical explanation (deviant or negative cases) of a phenomenon are found.

of cases). If a case that is inconsistent with the hypothesis is encountered, the analyst *either* redefines the hypothesis so as to exclude the deviant or negative case *or* reformulates the hypothesis and proceeds with further data collection. If the latter path is chosen, if a further deviant case is found, the analyst must choose again between reformulation or redefinition.

As this brief outline suggests, analytic induction is an extremely rigorous method of analysis, because encountering a single case that is inconsistent with a hypothesis is sufficient to necessitate further data collection or a reformulation of the hypothesis. Nor should the alternative of reformulating the hypothetical explanation be regarded as a soft option, as is shown by Katz's (1982) study of poverty lawyers in Chicago. Katz was interested in finding some characteristics that distinguished those who stayed on for some time as lawyers to help the poor (in spite of the lower pay and status associated with such work) from those whose tenure was brief. He writes that 'the definition of the explanandum [the phenomenon to be explained] was changed from staying two years, to desiring to stay two years, to desiring to stay in a frustrating place, to involvement in a frustrating place, to involvement in an insignificant status . . .' (Katz 1982: 200). Each shift necessitated a reanalysis and reorganization of his data. The rigours of analytic induction have not endeared the approach to qualitative researchers, and most of the examples used in textbooks to illustrate analytic induction derive from the 1940s and early 1950s (Bryman and Burgess 1994a: 4). Katz's work is unusual in being a relatively recent example. Bloor (1978) used a version of analytic induction in a study of doctors' decisions about whether to recommend an adenotonsillectomy. His approach especially diverged from the sequence described in Figure 24.1 in that a specific hypothesis was not formulated. An account using Bloor's approach can be found in Johnson (1998).

Two further problems with analytic induction are worth noting. First, the final explanations that analytic induction arrives at specify the conditions that are *sufficient* for the phenomenon occurring but rarely specify

the *necessary* conditions. This means that analytic induction may find out why people of certain characteristics or in certain circumstances become drug addicts (the focus of one major analytic induction study by Lindesmith 1947), but it does not allow us to say why those particular people became addicts rather than others in the same situation with the same characteristics. Second, it does not provide useful guidelines (unlike grounded theory) as to how many cases need to be investigated before the absence of negative cases and the validity of the hypothetical explanation (whether reformulated or not) can be confirmed.

Grounded theory

Grounded theory (see Key concept 17.2) has become by far the most widely used framework for analysing qualitative data. The book that is the chief wellspring of the approach, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (published in 1967), must be one of the most widely cited books in the social sciences. However, providing a definitive account of the approach is by no means a straightforward matter for the following reasons.

- Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory along different paths after the publication of the above book. Glaser felt that the approach to grounded theory that Strauss was promoting (most notably in Strauss 1987, and Strauss and Corbin 1990) was too prescriptive and emphasized too much the development of concepts rather than of theories (Glaser 1992). However, because of the greater prominence of Strauss's writings, his version is largely the one followed in the exposition below. There is, however, considerable controversy about what grounded theory is and entails (Charmaz 2000). It is not uncommon for users of grounded theory to indicate whether the version that they are following is the Glaserian or the Straussian approach.
- Straussian grounded theory has changed a great deal over the years. This is revealed in a constant addition

to the tool chest of analytic devices that is revealed in his writings.

- Some writers have suggested that grounded theory is honoured more in the breach than in the observance, implying that claims are often made that grounded theory has been used but that evidence of this being the case is at best uncertain (Bryman 1988a: 85, 91; Locke 1996; Charmaz 2000). Sometimes the term is employed simply to imply that the analyst has grounded his or her theory in data, so that grounded theory is more or less synonymous with an **inductive** approach. Grounded theory is more than this and refers to a set of procedures that are described below. Referencing academic publications is often part of a tactic of persuading readers of the legitimacy of one's work (Gilbert 1977), and this process can be discerned in the citation of grounded theory. Alternatively, researchers sometimes appear to have used just one or two features of grounded theory but refer to their having used the approach without qualification (Locke 1996). Against such a background, writing about the essential ingredients of grounded theory is not an easy matter.

It is not going to be possible to describe here grounded theory in all its facets; instead, its main features will be outlined. In order to organize the exposition, I find it helpful to distinguish between *tools* and *outcomes* in grounded theory.

Tools of grounded theory

Some of the tools of grounded theory have been referred to in previous chapters. Their location is indicated in the list that follows.

- *Theoretical sampling*—see Key concept 18.3.
- *Coding*—the key process in grounded theory, whereby data are broken down into component parts, which are given names. It begins soon after the collection of initial data. As Charmaz (2000: 515) puts it: 'We grounded theorists code our emerging data as we collect it . . . Unlike quantitative research that requires data to fit into *preconceived* standardized codes, the researcher's interpretations of data shape his or her emergent codes in grounded theory' (emphasis in original). In grounded theory, different types or levels of coding are recognized (see the section on 'Coding in grounded theory' below).
- *Theoretical saturation*—see Key concept 18.4. Theoretical saturation is a process that relates to two phases in grounded theory: the coding of data (implying that you reach a point where there is no further point in reviewing your data to see how well they fit with your concepts or categories) and the collection of data (implying that, once a concept or category has been developed, you may wish to continue collecting data to determine its nature and operation but then reach a point where new data are no longer illuminating the concept).
- *Constant comparison*—an aspect of grounded theory that was prominent in Glaser and Strauss (1967) and that is often referred to as a significant phase by practitioners, but that seems to be an implicit, rather than an explicit, element in more recent writings. It refers to a process of maintaining a close connection between data and conceptualization, so that the correspondence between concepts and categories with their indicators is not lost. More specifically, attention to the procedure of **constant comparison** enjoins the researcher constantly to compare phenomena being coded under a certain **category** so that a theoretical elaboration of that category can begin to emerge. Glaser and Strauss advised writing a *memo* (see below) on the category after a few phenomena had been coded. It also entails being sensitive to contrasts between the categories that are emerging.

Coding in grounded theory

Coding is one of the most central processes in grounded theory. It entails reviewing transcripts and/or field notes and giving labels (names) to component parts that seem to be of potential theoretical significance and/or that appear to be particularly salient within the social worlds of those being studied. As Charmaz (1983: 186) puts it: 'Codes . . . serve as shorthand devices to *label, separate, compile, and organize* data' (emphases in original). Coding is a somewhat different process from coding in relation to quantitative data, such as survey data. With the latter, coding is more or less solely a way of managing data, whereas in grounded theory, and indeed in approaches to qualitative data analysis that do not subscribe to the approach, it is an important first step in the generation of theory. Coding in grounded theory is also somewhat more tentative than in relation to the generation of quantitative data, where there is a tendency to think in terms of data and codes as very fixed. Coding in qualitative data analysis tends to be in a constant state of potential revision and fluidity. The data are treated as potential indicators of concepts, and the indicators are *constantly compared* (see the section on 'Tools of grounded theory' above) to see which concepts they best fit with. As Strauss (1987: 25) put it: 'Many indicators (behavioral actions/events) are examined comparatively by the analyst who then "codes" them, naming them as indicators of a class of events/behavioral actions.'

Strauss and Corbin (1990), drawing on their grounded theory approach, distinguish between three types of coding practice.

1. *Open coding*: 'the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data' (1990: 61); this process of coding yields concepts, which are later to be grouped and turned into categories. The coding performed in Tips and skills 'Coded text from the Disney project' provides an example of the use of open coding, though the project itself was not a grounded theory one.
2. *Axial coding*: 'a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories' (1990: 96). This is done by linking codes to contexts, to consequences, to patterns of interaction, and to causes. An example is provided by Hawker and Kerr (2007) in connection with a project on ex-soldiers. They note from an examination of two transcripts several categories that had been arrived at following open coding, including: 'army standards', 'self identity', and 'us and them'. These revealed that ex-soldiers felt that the army made them different from civilians, but that in addition they felt that the army had made them 'more committed, more efficient and better organized than many civilian workers' (Hawker and Kerr 2007: 94). This prompted the authors to think of a new category that extended the categories developed through open codes, which they called 'army added value'. They then examined the transcripts again to discern what this axial code comprised and to test its utility. However, as Charmaz (2006) notes, not all grounded theory exponents regard the idea or stage of axial coding to be useful.
3. *Selective coding*: 'the procedure of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development' (1990: 116). A *core category* is the central issue or focus around which all other categories are integrated. It is what Strauss and Corbin call the storyline that frames an analytical account of the phenomenon of interest. Hawker and Kerr (2007) note that they were developing as a possible selective code 'once a soldier, never a civilian', which refers to the tendency for socialization into the army to be so intensive that soldiers are never able to revert fully to civilian life.

The three types of coding are really different levels of coding, and each relates to a different point in the elaboration of categories in grounded theory. Not all grounded theory practitioners operate with this threefold distinction,

and indeed the notion of axial coding has been especially controversial because it is sometimes perceived as closing off too quickly in a project the open-endedness and exploratory character of coding in qualitative data analysis.

Charmaz (2006) prefers to distinguish between two main forms or phases of coding: *initial coding* and *selective or focused coding*. Initial coding tends to be very detailed and may even result in a code per line of text, whereby a code is assigned to every line of text to provide initial impressions of the data. It is crucial at this stage to be open-minded and to generate as many new ideas and hence codes as necessary to encapsulate the data. It is the qualitative researcher's first steps towards making sense of his or her data. Charmaz suggests that it is important in initial coding to recognize that, although codes will reflect the perspectives of research participants, when the qualitative researcher makes sense of the codes, he or she may end up viewing their social world somewhat differently from them. Focused coding entails emphasizing the most common codes and those that are seen as most revealing about the data. This means that some, if not many, initial codes will be dropped. As she puts it: 'Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely' (Charmaz 2006: 57–8). New codes may be generated by combining initial codes. The data are then re-explored and re-evaluated in terms of these selected codes.

Pidgeon and Henwood (2004) provide a useful example of the move from initial coding to a focused and then axial coding based on Henwood's study of adult mother-daughter relationships. Sixty interviews with mother-daughter dyads were conducted. They write:

The initial coding led to the development of a long and varied, but highly unwieldy, list of instances under the label 'Relational Closeness'. The attributes that had been coded onto the card were initially glossed as attaching global value to the relationship. However, closer reading and comparison of the individual instances indicated a much more mixed view of the emotional intensity of the relationships, ranging from a welcome but painful sense of gratitude and debt to a stance of hypersensitivity and a desire to flee from a relationship which involved 'confinement' or 'smothering'. The inextricable link between the two concepts resulting from this subdivision was retained and coded through their respective labels 'Closeness' and 'Overcloseness'. This link then became a key stimulus and focus for conceptual development and reflection ... (Pidgeon and Henwood 2004: 638)

Although there are slight differences in the way in which the phases of the coding process is supposed to occur in grounded theory according to its practitioners, there is a basic understanding of it as involving a movement from generating codes that stay close to the data to more selective and abstract ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon of interest.

Outcomes of grounded theory

The following are the products of different phases of grounded theory.

- *Concept(s)*—refers to labels given to discrete phenomena; concepts are referred to as the ‘building blocks of theory’ (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 101). Concepts are produced through *open coding*.
- *Category, categories*—a **category** is a concept that has been elaborated so that it is regarded as representing real-world phenomena. As noted in Key concept 18.4, a category may subsume two or more concepts. As such, categories are at a higher level of abstraction than concepts. A category may become a *core category* around which the other categories pivot. Research in focus 24.1 provides a good example of the emergence of a core category.
- *Properties*—attributes or aspects of a category.
- *Hypotheses*—initial hunches about relationships between concepts.
- *Theory*—according to Strauss and Corbin (1998: 22): ‘a set of well-developed categories . . . that are systematically related through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social . . . or other phenomenon.’ Since the inception of grounded theory, writings have pointed to two types or levels of theory: *substantive theory* and *formal theory*. The former relates to theory in a certain empirical instance or substantive area, such as occupational socialization. A formal theory is at a higher level of abstraction and has a wider range of applicability to several substantive areas, such as socialization in a number of spheres, suggesting that higher-level processes are at work. The generation of formal theory requires data collection in contrasting settings.



Research in focus 24.1 Categories in grounded theory

Orona's (1997) study of sufferers of Alzheimer's disease and in particular of their relatives exemplifies many features of grounded theory. Orona began her research with an interest in the decision-making process that led relatives to place sufferers in a home. She gradually realized from coding her interview transcripts that this was not a crucial feature for relatives, as she had anticipated, not least because many of them simply felt they had no choice. Instead, she was slowly taken by the significance for relatives of the ‘identity loss’ sufferers were deemed to experience. This gradually became her core category. She conducted further interviews in order to flesh this notion out and reread existing transcripts in the light of it. The link between indicators and category can be seen in relatives' references to the sufferer as ‘gone’, ‘different’, ‘not the same person’, and as a ‘stranger’. Orona was able to unearth four major themes that emerged around the process of identity loss. The theme of ‘temporality’ was particularly significant in Orona's emerging theoretical reflections and was revealed in such comments in transcripts as:

It was the *time of the year* when nobody goes in the yard anyway . . .

At the *beginning* . . .

It got much worse *later on*.

More and more, he was leaning on me.

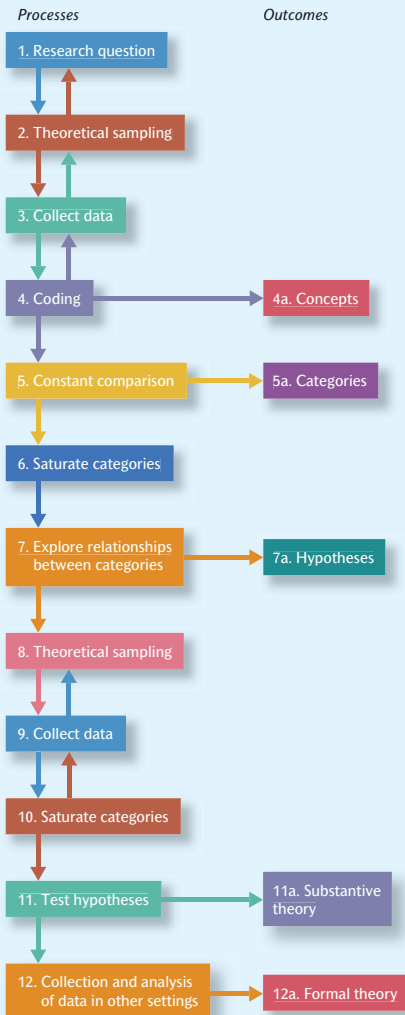
Before she would never have been like that.

She *used to* love coffee. (Orona 1997: 179–80)

In other words, such comments served as indicators that allowed the category ‘temporality’ to be built up. The issue of temporality was significant in Orona's emerging analysis, because it related to the core category of identity loss. Relatives sought to help sufferers maintain their identities. However, gradually, with the passage of time, crucial events meant that the relatives could no longer deny sufferers' identity loss.

Figure 24.2

Processes and outcomes in grounded theory



The different elements can be portrayed as in Figure 24.2. As with all diagrams, this is a representation, and it is particularly so in the case of grounded theory, because the existence of different versions of the approach

does not readily permit a more definitive rendition. Also, it is difficult to get across diagrammatically the iterative nature of grounded theory—in particular its commitment to the idea that data collection and analysis occur in parallel. This is partly achieved in the diagram through the presence of arrows pointing in both directions in relation to certain steps. The figure implies the following.

- The researcher begins with a general research question (step 1).
- Relevant people and/or incidents are theoretically sampled (step 2).
- Relevant data are collected (step 3).
- Data are coded (step 4), which may at the level of open coding generate concepts (step 4a).
- There is a constant movement backwards and forwards between the first four steps, so that early coding suggests the need for new data, which results in the need to sample theoretically, and so on.
- Through a constant comparison of indicators and concepts (step 5) categories are generated (step 5a). The crucial issue is to ensure that there is a fit between indicators and concepts.
- Categories are saturated during the coding process (step 6).
- Relationships between categories are explored (step 7) in such a way that hypotheses about connections between categories emerge (step 7a).
- Further data are collected via theoretical sampling (steps 8 and 9).
- The collection of data is likely to be governed by the theoretical saturation principle (step 10) and by the testing of the emerging hypotheses (step 11), which leads to the specification of substantive theory (step 11a). See Research in focus 24.2 for an illustration.
- The substantive theory is explored using grounded theory processes in relation to different settings from that in which it was generated (step 12), so that formal theory may be generated (step 12a). A formal theory will relate to more abstract categories, which are not specifically concerned with the research area in question (for example, chronically ill men, relatives of sufferers of Alzheimer's disease).

Step 12 is relatively unusual in grounded theory, because researchers typically concentrate on a certain setting, although the investigation described in Research in focus 24.3 did examine other settings to explore the emerging concepts. A further way in which formal theory can be generated is through the use of existing theory and research in comparable settings.



Research in focus 24.2

Grounded theory in action

Charmaz's (1997) research is concerned with the identity dilemmas of men who have chronic (but not terminal) illnesses. She outlines very clearly the chief steps in her analysis.

- Interviews with men and a small number of women.
- Exploring the transcripts for gender differences.
- Searching for themes in the men's interviews and published personal accounts (for example, autobiographies). An example is the notion of 'accommodation to uncertainty', as men find ways of dealing with the unpredictable paths of their illnesses.
- Building 'analytic categories from men's definitions of and taken-for-granted assumptions about their situations' (1997: 39). Of particular significance in her work is the idea of 'identity dilemmas'—that is, the ways in which men approach and possibly resolve the assault on their traditional self-images in terms of masculinity. She shows that men often used strategies to re-establish earlier selves, so that for many audiences their identity (at least in their own eyes) could be preserved.
- Further interviews designed to refine the categories.
- Rereading personal accounts of chronic illness with a particular focus on gender.
- Reading a new group of personal accounts.
- Making 'comparisons with women on selected key points' (1997: 39).

Charmaz provides a substantive theory that helps to explain the importance of notions of masculinity for the carving-out of an identity for chronically ill men.



Research in focus 24.3

Grounded theory in a study of consumer experiences of museums

Goulding (2009) has discussed the way in which she implemented grounded theory in the context of a study of how consumers experience museums, particularly so-called 'living' museums that seek to recreate the UK's industrial heritage. The approach she took was closer to Glaser's than to Strauss's version of grounded theory. Initially, she selected an open-air museum and interviewed the director and then conducted observations of parties of visitors, noting how they handled the attractions and exhibits. While these relatively unstructured observations were illuminating in terms of how visitors responded to the attractions, they did not generate insights into motivations, so Goulding conducted interviews with visitors to shed light on such things as their expectations and their perceptions of the exhibits. She conducted a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts, which generated a huge number of codes and words. She reduced this vast array of codes to themes that helped to understand her data, and this produced seven concepts, such as: the stimulation of nostalgia, the desire for education, and experience of alienation in the present. Each of these concepts had distinctive properties or dimensions. For example, the stimulation of nostalgia was encapsulated in such things as a sense of retreat from the present and a 'rose-tinted' recollection of the past. However, Goulding felt that she had not saturated her concepts, so she collected new data in two new comparable but different sites. The same data-collection approach was taken as with the original site but no new concepts were generated. However, the new data did allow her to reinforce her concepts and to produce a categorization of three types of visitor to such museums: existential, purist, and social. For example, existential visitors tended to exhibit high levels of the stimulation of nostalgia (one of the seven concepts derived from the data—see above), which was apparent from their position with regard to codes like 'selective recall', 'rose-tinted remembrance', a 'rejection of the present', and an 'ability to distort the past'.

Concepts and categories are perhaps the key elements in grounded theory. Indeed, it is sometimes suggested that, as a qualitative data analysis strategy, grounded theory works better for generating categories than theory. In part, this may be because studies purporting to use the approach often generate grounded *concepts* rather than grounded theory as such. Concepts and categories are nonetheless at the heart of the approach, and key processes such as coding, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation are designed to guide their generation.

Memos

One aid to the generation of concepts and categories is the *memo*. Memos in grounded theory are notes that

researchers might write for themselves and for those with whom they work concerning such elements of grounded theory as coding or concepts. They serve as reminders about what is meant by the terms being used and provide the building blocks for a certain amount of reflection. Memos are potentially very helpful to researchers in helping them to crystallize ideas and not to lose track of their thinking on various topics. An illustration of a memo from research in which I was involved is provided in Research in focus 24.4.

Finding examples of grounded theory that reveal all its facets and stages is very difficult, and it is unsurprising that many expositions of grounded theory fall back on the original illustrations provided in Glaser and Strauss (1967). Many studies show some of its ingredients but



Research in focus 24.4

A memo

In the course of research into the bus industry that I carried out with colleagues in the early 1990s (Bryman et al. 1996), we noticed that the managers we interviewed frequently referred to the notion that their companies had inherited features that derived from the running of those companies before deregulation. They often referred to the idea of inheriting characteristics that held them back in trying to meet the competitive environment they faced in the 1990s. As such, inheritance is what Strauss (1987) calls an 'in vivo code' (one that derives from the natural language of people in the social context being studied), rather than what he calls 'sociologically constructed codes', which are labels employing the analyst's own terminology. The following memo outlines the concept of inheritance, provides some illustrative quotations, and suggests some properties of the concept.

Memo for inheritance

Inheritance: many of our interviewees suggest that they have inherited certain company traits and traditions from the period prior to deregulation (i.e. pre-1985). It is a term that many of them themselves employed to denote company attributes that are not of their choosing but have survived from the pre-deregulation period. The key point about inheritance is that the inherited elements are seen by our interviewees as hindering their ability to respond to the changing environment of the post-deregulation era.

Inherited features include:

- expensive and often inappropriate fleets of vehicles and depots;
- the survival of attitudes and behaviour patterns, particularly among bus drivers, which are seen as inappropriate to the new environment (e.g. lack of concern for customer service) and which hinder service innovation;
- high wage rates associated with the pre-deregulation era; means that new competitors can enter the market while paying drivers lower wages.

Sample comments:

'We *inherited* a very high cost structure because of deregulation. 75% of our staff were paid in terms of conditions affected by [rates prior to deregulation]' (Commercial Director, Company B).

'I suppose another major weakness is that we are very tied by conditions and practices we've *inherited*' (Commercial Director, Company G).

'We have what we've *inherited* and we now have a massive surplus of double decks . . . We have to go on operating those' (Managing Director, Company B).

Managing Director of Company E said the company had inherited staff who were steeped in pre-deregulation attitudes, which meant that 'we don't have a staff where the message is "the customer is number one". We don't have a staff where that is emblazoned on the hearts and minds of everyone, far from it.'

Prepost-deregulation: interviewee makes a contrast between the periods before and after deregulation to show how they've changed. This shows in a sense the *absence* of inherited features and their possible impact; can refer to how the impact of possibly inherited features was negated or offset. For example, X referring to the recent end of the 3-week strike: 'there was no way we were going to give in to this sort of thing, this sort of blackmail. We just refused to move and the trade unions had never experienced that. It was all part of the change in culture following deregulation . . .'

Inheriting constraints: such as staff on high wage rates and with inappropriate attitudes.

Inheriting surplus capacity: such as too many buses or wrong size.

not others. Research in focus 24.1 provides an illustration by one of Strauss's students that incorporates some key grounded theory features.

Criticisms of grounded theory

In spite of the frequency with which it is cited and the frequent lip service paid to it, grounded theory is not without its limitations, of which the following can be briefly registered.

- Bulmer (1979) has questioned whether, as prescribed by the advocates of grounded theory, researchers can suspend their awareness of relevant theories or concepts until quite a late stage in the process of analysis. Social researchers are typically sensitive to the conceptual armoury of their disciplines, and it seems unlikely that this awareness can be put aside. Indeed, nowadays it is rarely accepted that theory-neutral observation is feasible. In other words, it is generally agreed that what we 'see' when we conduct research is conditioned by many factors, one of which is what we already know about the social world being studied (both in terms of social scientific conceptualizations and as members of society). Also, many writers might take the view that it is desirable that researchers are sensitive to existing conceptualizations, so that their investigations are focused and can build upon the work of others.
- Related to this first point is that, in many circumstances, researchers are required to spell out the possible implications of their planned investigation. For example, a lecturer making a bid for research funding or a student applying for funding for postgraduate research is usually required to demonstrate how his or her research will build upon what is already known or to demonstrate that he or she has a reasonably tightly defined research question, something that is also frequently disdained in grounded theory.
- There are practical difficulties with grounded theory. The time taken to transcribe recordings of interviews, for example, can make it difficult for researchers, especially when they have tight deadlines, to carry out a genuine grounded theory analysis with its constant interplay of data collection and conceptualization.
- It is somewhat doubtful whether grounded theory in many instances really results in *theory*. As previously suggested, it provides a rigorous approach to the generation of concepts, but it is often difficult to see what theory, in the sense of an explanation of something, is being put forward. Moreover, in spite of the frequent lip service paid to the generation of formal theory, most grounded theories are substantive in character; in other words, they pertain to the specific social phenomenon being researched and not to a broader range of phenomena (though, of course, they *may* have such broader applicability).
- In spite of the large amount written on grounded theory, but perhaps because of the many subtle changes in its presentation, grounded theory is still vague on certain points, such as the difference between concepts and categories. For example, while Strauss and Corbin (1998: 73) refer to theoretical sampling as 'sampling on the basis of emerging *concepts*' (emphasis added), Charmaz (2000: 519) writes that it is used to 'develop our emerging *categories*' (emphasis added). The term 'categories' is increasingly being employed rather than concepts, but such inconsistent use of key terms is not helpful to people trying to understand the overall process.
- Grounded theory is very much associated with an approach to data analysis that invites researchers to

fragment their data by coding the data into discrete chunks. However, in the eyes of some writers, this kind of activity results in a loss of a sense of context and of narrative flow (Coffey and Atkinson 1996), a point to which I will return below.

- The presence of competing accounts of the ingredients of grounded theory does not make it easy to characterize it or to establish how to use it. This situation has been made even more problematic by Charmaz's (2000) suggestion that most grounded theory is objectivist and that an alternative, constructionist (she calls it *constructivist*) approach is preferable. She argues that the grounded theory associated with Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin is objectivist in that it aims to uncover a reality that is external to social actors. She offers an alternative, constructionist version that 'assumes that people create and maintain meaningful worlds through dialectical processes of conferring meaning on their realities and acting within them . . . Thus, social reality does not exist independent of human action' (Charmaz 2000: 521). Such a position stands in contrast to earlier grounded theory texts that 'imply that categories and concepts inhere within the data, awaiting the researcher's discovery. . . . Instead, a constructivist approach recognizes that the categories, concepts, and theoretical level of an analysis emerge from the researcher's interaction within the field and questions about the data' (Charmaz 2000: 522). One difficulty here is that the two meanings of constructionism referred to in Key concept 2.6 seem to be conflated. Charmaz's first quotation above refers to constructionism as an ontological position in relating to social objects and categories; the second is

a reference to constructionism in relation to the nature of knowledge of the social world. It is certainly fair to suggest that Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin in their various writings neglect the role of the researcher in the generation of knowledge, but it is not clear that they are indifferent to the notion that social reality exists independently of social actors. Strauss was, after all, the lead of the study referred to on pages 33–4 concerning the hospital as a negotiated order, which was used as an illustration of constructionism (Strauss et al. 1973). Also, Orona's (1997) account of her grounded theory analysis of sufferers of Alzheimer's disease is described in a commentary on the research by Strauss and Corbin (1997a: 172) as a 'textbook exemplification' of the approach. Yet this study is concerned with the subjective experience of the disease (interpretivism) and with the *construction* of identity in everyday life. However, there is little doubt that there is considerable confusion currently about the nature of grounded theory.

Nonetheless, grounded theory probably represents the most influential general strategy for conducting qualitative data analysis, though how far the approach is followed varies from study to study. What can be said is that many of its core processes, such as coding, memos, and the very idea of allowing theoretical ideas to emerge out of one's data, have been hugely influential. Indeed, it is striking that one of the main developments in qualitative data analysis since the early 1990s—computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS)—has implicitly promoted many of these processes, because the software programs have often been written with grounded theory in mind (Richards and Richards 1994; Lonkila 1995).



Basic operations in qualitative data analysis

Coding is the starting point for most forms of qualitative data analysis, although some writers prefer to call the process *indexing* rather than coding. The principles involved have been well developed by writers on grounded theory and others. Some of the considerations in developing codes, some of which are derived from Lofland and Lofland (1995), are as follows.

- Of what general category is this item of data an instance?
- What does this item of data represent?
- What is this item of data about?
- Of what topic is this item of data an instance?
- What question about a topic does this item of data suggest?
- What sort of answer to a question about a topic does this item of data imply?
- What is happening here?
- What are people doing?
- What do people say they are doing?
- What kind of event is going on?



Tips and skills

Coded text from the Disney project

Interviewer	OK. What were your views or feelings about the presentation of different cultures, as shown in, for example, Jungle Cruise or It's a Small World at the Magic Kingdom or in World Showcase at Epcot?		
Wife	Well, I thought the different countries at Epcot were wonderful, but I need to say more than that, don't I?	uncritical enthusiasm	aesthetic critique
Husband	They were very good and some were better than others, but that was down to the host countries themselves really, as I suppose each of the countries represented would have been responsible for their own part, so that's nothing to do with Disney, I wouldn't have thought. I mean some of the landmarks were hard to recognize for what they were supposed to be, but some were very well done. Britain was OK, but there was only a pub and a Welsh shop there really, whereas some of the other pavilions, as I think they were called, were good ambassadors for the countries they represented. China, for example, had an excellent 360 degree film showing parts of China and I found that very interesting.	not critical of Disney	
		content critique	
Interviewer	Did you think there was anything lacking about the content?		
Husband	Well I did notice that there weren't many black people at World Showcase, particularly the American Adventure. Now whether we were there on an unusual day in that respect I don't know, but we saw plenty of black Americans in the Magic Kingdom and other places, but very few if any in that World Showcase. And there was certainly little mention of black history in the American Adventure presentation, so maybe they felt alienated by that, I don't know, but they were noticeable by their absence.	visitors' ethnicity	ethnicity critique
		visitors' ethnicity	
Interviewer	So did you think there were any special emphases?		
Husband	Well thinking about it now, because I hadn't really given this any consideration before you started asking about it, but thinking about it now, it was only really representative of the developed world, you know, Britain, America, Japan, world leaders many of them in technology, and there was nothing of the Third World there. Maybe that's their own fault, maybe they were asked to participate and didn't, but now that I think about it, that does come to me. What do you think, love?	nationality critique	
Wife	Well, like you, I hadn't thought of it like that before, but I agree with you.		

Steps and considerations in coding

The following steps and considerations need to be borne in mind in preparation for and during coding.

- *Code as soon as possible.* It is well worth coding as you go along, as grounded theory suggests. This may sharpen your understanding of your data and help with theoretical sampling. Also, it may help to alleviate the feeling of being swamped by your data, which may happen if you defer analysis entirely until the end of the data collection period. At the very least, you should ensure that, if your data collection involves

recording interviews, you begin transcription at a relatively early stage.

- *Read through your initial set of transcripts, field notes, documents, etc.,* without taking any notes or considering an interpretation; perhaps at the end jot down a few general notes about what struck you as especially interesting, important, or significant.
- *Do it again.* Read through your data again, but this time begin to make marginal notes about significant remarks or observations. Make as many as possible. Initially, they will be very basic—perhaps key words used by your respondents, names that you give to

themes in the data. When you do this you are *coding*—generating an index of terms that will help you to interpret and theorize in relation to your data.

- *Review your codes.* Begin to review your codes, possibly in relation to your transcripts. Are you using two or more words or phrases to describe the same phenomenon? If so, remove one of them. Do some of your codes relate to concepts and categories in the existing literature? If so, might it be sensible to use these instead? Can you see any connections between the codes? Is there some evidence that respondents believe that one thing tends to be associated with or caused by something else? If so, how do you characterize and therefore code these connections?
- *Consider more general theoretical ideas in relation to codes and data.* At this point, you should be beginning to generate some general theoretical ideas about your data. Try to outline connections between concepts and categories you are developing. Consider in more detail how they relate to the existing literature. Develop hypotheses about the linkages you are making and go back to your data to see if they can be confirmed.
- Remember that *any one item or slice of data can and often should be coded in more than one way.*
- *Do not worry about generating what seem to be too many codes*—at least in the early stages of your analysis; some will be fruitful and others will not—the important thing is to be as inventive and imaginative as possible; you can worry about tidying things up later.
- *Keep coding in perspective.* Do not equate coding with analysis. It is part of your analysis, albeit an important one. It is a mechanism for thinking about the meaning of your data *and* for reducing the vast amount of data that you are facing (Huberman and Miles 1994). You must still interpret your findings, which means attending to issues like the significance of your coded material for the lives of the people you are studying,

forging interconnections between codes, and reflecting on the overall importance of your findings for the research questions and the research literature that have driven your data collection.

Turning data into fragments

The coding of such materials as interview transcripts has typically entailed writing marginal notes on them and gradually refining those notes into codes. In this way, portions of transcripts become seen as belonging to certain names or labels. In the past, this process was accompanied by cutting and pasting in the literal sense of using scissors and paste. It entailed cutting up one's transcripts into files of chunks of data, with each file representing a code. The process of cutting and pasting is useful for data retrieval, though it is always important to make sure that you have ways of identifying the origins of the chunk of text (for example, name, position, date). Word-processing programs allow this to be done in a way that does not rely on your DIY skills so much (see Research in focus 22.4 for an account of this use of word-processing software). Nowadays CAQDAS software is increasingly being used to perform these tasks (see Chapter 25).

As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) observe, following Strauss and Corbin's account (1990) of grounded theory, codes should not be thought of purely as mechanisms for the fragmentation and retrieval of text. In other words, they can do more than simply manage the data you have gathered. For example, if we ask about the properties and interconnections between codes, we may begin to see that some of them may be dimensions of a broader phenomenon. For example, as shown in the next chapter (see especially Figure 25.1), 'ethnicity critique' came to be seen as a dimension of 'ideology critique', along with 'class critique' and 'gender critique'. In this way, we can begin to map the more general or formal properties of concepts that are being developed.



Tips and skills

Too many codes

The initial coding of a large corpus of data can generate an alarming number of codes. Charmaz (2004), for example, recommends as a first stage in coding for grounded theory 'line by line coding', whereby virtually every line in a transcript or other source of data will have a code attached to it. She argues that this process means that the qualitative researcher does not lose contact with his or her data and the perspectives and interpretations of those being studied. However, this process will almost certainly result in a proliferation of codes. This should not be alarming. What the analyst of qualitative data needs to do is ask questions about what these codes have in common so that they can be combined into higher-order and more abstract codes.

Problems with coding

One of the most commonly mentioned criticisms of the coding approach to qualitative data analysis is the possible problem of losing the context of what is said. By plucking chunks of text out of the context within which they appeared, such as a particular interview transcript, the social setting can be lost.

A second criticism of coding is that it results in a fragmentation of data, so that the narrative flow of what people say is lost (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Sensitivity to this issue has been heightened by a growing interest in **narrative analysis** since the late 1980s (see the section on 'Narrative Analysis' below). Riessman (1993) became concerned about the fragmentation of data that results from coding themes when she came to analyse data she had collected through structured interviews on divorce and gender. She writes:

Some [interviewees] developed long accounts of what had happened in their marriages to justify their divorces. I did not realize these were narratives until I struggled to code them. Applying traditional qualitative methods, I searched the texts for common thematic elements. But some individuals knotted together several themes into long accounts that had coherence and sequence, defying easy categorization. I found myself not wanting to fragment the long accounts into distinct thematic categories. There seemed to be a common structure beneath talk about a variety of topics. While I coded one interview, a respondent provided language for my trouble. As I have thought about it since, it was a 'click moment' in my biography as a narrative researcher . . . (Riessman 1993: p. vi)

Riessman's account is interesting because it suggests several possibilities: that the coding method of qualitative data analysis fragments data; that some forms of data may be unsuitable for the coding method; and that researchers can turn narrative analysis on themselves, since what she provides in this passage is precisely a narrative. Interest in narrative analysis certainly shows signs of growing, and in large part this trend parallels the rebirth of interest in the life history approach (see Chapter 20). Nonetheless, the coding method is unlikely to become less prominent, because of several factors: its widespread acceptance in the research community; not all analysts are interested in research questions that lend themselves to the elicitation of narratives; the influence of grounded theory and its associated techniques; and the growing use and acceptance of computer software for qualitative data analysis, which frequently invites a coding approach.

Regardless of which analytical strategy you employ, what you must not do is simply say: 'this is what my subjects said and did—isn't that incredibly interesting'. It may be reasonably interesting, but your work can acquire significance only when you theorize in relation to it. Many researchers are wary of this—they worry that, in the process of interpretation and theorizing, they may fail to do justice to what they have seen and heard; that they may contaminate their subjects' words and behaviour. This is a risk, but it has to be balanced against the fact that your findings acquire significance in our intellectual community only when you have reflected on, interpreted, and theorized your data. You are not there as a mere mouthpiece.



Thematic analysis

One of the most common approaches to qualitative data analysis entails what is often referred to as **thematic analysis**. However, unlike strategies like grounded theory or critical discourse analysis, this is not an approach to analysis that has an identifiable heritage or that has been outlined in terms of a distinctive cluster of techniques. Indeed, the search for themes is an activity that can be discerned in many if not most approaches to qualitative data analysis, such as grounded theory, critical discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis, and narrative analysis. Also, for some writers a theme is more or less the

same as a code, whereas for others it transcends any one code and is built up out of groups of codes. Key concept 24.2 provides some criteria for identifying what a theme is.

This does not appear to be a promising start, because, although qualitative researchers often claim to have employed thematic analysis, it is not an identifiable approach. Indeed, it did not appear as a separate section in the first two editions of this book! Yet, as a simple exercise while writing this section, I did a search on 21 October 2010 of the SSCI via the Web of Science

for 'thematic analysis' for the years 2000–10 inclusive and came up with 1,184 hits. The vast majority of these derived from references in abstracts to the article being based on 'thematic analysis'. This figure of 1,184 represents a large increase on the corresponding figure in the previous edition of this book for the 2000–7 period, when 400 hits were produced. For example, Jones et al. (2010: 109), in their study of early retirement referred to at several points in Chapter 1, write that 'a thematic analysis was undertaken'. Prainsack and Kitzberger (2009: 53), drawing on their research on prisoners' views of DNA evidence, write about 'themes that emerged from our interviews'.

One general strategy for assisting a thematic analysis of qualitative data is provided by Framework, an approach that has been developed at the National Centre for Social Research in the UK. Framework is described as a 'matrix based method for ordering and synthesising data' (Ritchie et al. 2003: 219). The idea is to construct an index of central themes and subthemes, which are then represented in a matrix that closely resembles an SPSS spreadsheet with its display of cases and variables. The themes and subthemes are essentially recurring motifs in the text that are then applied to the data. The themes and subthemes are the product of a thorough

reading and rereading of the transcripts or field notes that make up the data. This framework is then applied to the data, which are organized initially into core themes, and the data are then displayed in terms of subthemes within the matrix and for each case. If we take the Disney project data described in Chapter 23, one of the main themes that was identified was 'Ideological critique'. This theme can be viewed as having a number of subthemes—class critique; ethnicity critique; gender critique; and nationality critique. Figure 24.3 is a matrix that draws on the coded text in Tips and skills 'Coded text from the Disney project' and that would be used for representing the data on the theme 'Ideological critique'. The four subthemes are presented, and the idea is to place brief snippets from the data into the appropriate cell. Thus, the passage in Tips and skills 'Coded text from the Disney project' provides the data for the insertion of some material into two of the cells for Interviewee 4. It also specifies the location within the transcript of the snippet(s) that are included in the cell. Ritchie et al. advise that, when inserting material into cells, the researcher should:

1. indicate where in the transcript the fragment comes from (I have used the question number);

Figure 24.3

The Framework approach to thematic analysis

Theme: Ideological critique				
	Class critique	Ethnicity critique	Gender critique	Nationality critique
Interviewee 1				
Interviewee 2				
Interviewee 3				
Interviewee 4		'saw plenty of black Americans' in MK 'but few if any in that World Showcase'. 'Little mention of black history' (Q14)		World Showcase 'only really representative of the developed world' (Q14)
Interviewee 5				

2. keep the language of the research participant as far as possible;
3. try not to insert too much quoted material; and
4. use abbreviations in cells so that cells do not become too full.

As its name implies, this approach is meant to provide a framework for the thematic analysis of qualitative data and provides one way of thinking about how to manage

themes and data. It does not necessarily tell the user how to identify themes, which, as the authors suggest, are likely to reflect the analyst's awareness of recurring ideas and topics in the data. Software has been designed for the implementation of the Framework approach. Details can be found at:

www.framework-natcen.co.uk (accessed 7 February 2011).



Key concept 24.2

What is a theme?

In spite of its apparent frequency of use in the analysis of qualitative data (see main text), thematic analysis is a remarkably underdeveloped procedure, in that there are few specifications of its steps or ingredients. This is changing (e.g. Ryan and Bernard 2003; Braun and Clarke 2006), but, even so, what actually constitutes a theme is often not spelled out. By and large, we can say that a theme is:

- a category identified by the analyst through his/her data;
- that relates to his/her research focus (and quite possibly the research questions);
- that builds on codes identified in transcripts and/or field notes;
- and that provides the researcher with the basis for a theoretical understanding of his or her data that can make a theoretical contribution to the literature relating to the research focus.

When searching for themes, Ryan and Bernard (2003) recommend looking for:

- *repetitions*: topics that recur again and again;
- *indigenous typologies or categories*: local expressions that are either unfamiliar or are used in an unfamiliar way;
- *metaphors and analogies*: the ways in which participants represent their thoughts in terms of metaphors or analogies (they give the example of people describing their marriage as like 'the Rock of Gibraltar');
- *transitions*: the ways in which topics shift in transcripts and other materials;
- *similarities and differences*: exploring how interviewees might discuss a topic in different ways or differ from each other in certain ways or exploring whole texts like transcripts and asking how they differ;
- *linguistic connectors*: examining the use of words like 'because' or 'since', because such terms point to causal connections in the minds of participants;
- *missing data*: reflecting on what is *not* in the data by asking questions about what interviewees, for example, omit in their answers to questions;

- *theory-related material*: using social scientific concepts as a springboard for themes.

An emphasis on repetition is probably one of the most common criteria for establishing that a pattern within the data warrants being considered a theme. Repetition may refer to recurrence within a data source (for example, an interview transcript or document) or, as is more often the case, across data sources (for example, a corpus of interview transcripts or documents). However, repetition *per se* is an insufficient criterion for something to warrant being labelled a theme. Most importantly, it must be relevant to the investigation's research questions or research focus. In other words, simply because quite a large number of people who have been interviewed say much the same thing does not mean it warrants being considered a theme. The identification of a theme is a stage or two further on from coding data in terms of initial or open codes (Braun and Clarke 2006). It requires the researcher to reflect on the initial codes that have been generated and to gain a sense of the continuities and linkages between them.

While thematic analysis lacks a clearly specified series of procedures, in spite of its prominence as a means of conducting qualitative data analysis, the Framework approach and Ryan and Bernard's suggestions provide some pointers about how to begin and to organize such an analysis. It can be employed in relation to several of the different ways of analysing qualitative data covered in this book, such as grounded theory, narrative analysis,

critical discourse analysis, and qualitative content analysis. It has also been employed in relation to the systematic review of qualitative research (Thomas and Harden 2008). It is this flexibility—the fact that it can be deployed in such different contexts—that probably accounts for its popularity, in spite of the absence of a great deal of codification of its core procedures.



Student experience

Thematic analysis of transcripts

Several of the students who had conducted qualitative research using interviews mentioned forms of analysis that were indicative of adopting a thematic approach. Rebecca Barnes writes that she sought to 'identify key themes', while Erin Sanders writes that she 'transcribed the interviews verbatim—and used NVivo to code the transcripts—looking for emerging and relevant themes'.

Once Samantha Vandermark had completed her focus groups with mothers of young children and transcribed them, she

began a qualitative thematic analysis. I read through the transcripts line by line, noting down themes as I saw them appear in the data, for example if a mother openly spoke about the negative impact of fast food chains on childhood health, I would note this down as 'Causes—fast food'. At the bottom of each page I would then note down the main themes that had come from that page's conversation. From this initial, detailed analysis I looked again at the themes that had been pulled out, and started to conglomerate these into wider thematic categories that would represent overall segments of conversation from within the focus groups. Finally, I used the electronic copies of my transcripts to piece together the segments of data which represented each theme, and developed my qualitative analysis through analysing in detail what the mothers said about these themes and what they might signify in terms of wider social attitudes and norms.



To read more about Rebecca's, Erin's, and Samantha's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/



Student experience

Combining memos with thematic analysis

Isabella Robbins used memos as a means of elaborating her thematic analysis of her data. Her memos formed part of her discussions with her supervisor.

I developed analytic memos, on each interview completed, throughout the data-collection period. These along with full verbatim transcripts and message board data were put into NVivo. I had ideas about the thematicity before I used NVivo, so at the beginning a pen and paper were used in conjunction with NVivo. The themes that I was pulling from the data were consistent, and this felt reassuring. My supervisors were also involved with the analysis, in that I would report back with analytic memos and we discussed emerging themes, and I developed ideas and analysis from there.



To read more about Isabella's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/



Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis, which was referred to in the previous section, is an approach to the elicitation and analysis of data that is sensitive to the sense of temporal sequence that people, as providers of accounts (often in the form of stories) about themselves or events by which they are affected, detect in their lives and surrounding episodes and inject into their accounts. With narrative analysis, the focus of attention shifts from ‘what actually happened?’ to ‘how do people make sense of what happened?’ The last point can be expanded to ‘how do people make sense of what happened and to what effect?’, because stories are nearly always told with a purpose in mind—there is an intended effect. Proponents of narrative analysis argue that most approaches to the collection and analysis of data neglect the fact that people perceive their lives in terms of continuity and process and that attempts to understand social life that are not attuned to this feature neglect the perspective of those being studied. Life history research (see Chapter 20) has been a prominent location for the application of a narrative analysis (see Research in focus 20.8 for an example), but its use can be much broader than this. Mishler (1986: 77), for example, has argued for greater interest in ‘elicited personal narratives’. In his view, and that of many others, the answers that people provide, in particular in qualitative interviews, can be viewed as stories that are potential fodder for a narrative analysis. In other words, narrative analysis relates not just to the life span but also to accounts relating to episodes and to the interconnections between them.

Some researchers apply narrative analysis to interview accounts. For example, in her account of her ‘click

moment’ as a narrative researcher (see the long quotation on page 582), Riessman describes how she applied narrative analysis to conventional interview transcript material and then began to uncover the stories her interviewees were telling her. In this case, Riessman was applying a narrative approach to materials that had been gathered in a conventional way for conventional purposes. Other researchers start out with the intention of conducting a narrative analysis and deliberately ask people to recount stories (e.g. R. L. Miller 2000). Thus, while stories can arise out of answers to questions that are not designed to elicit a narrative, certain kinds of question are especially likely to elicit them. Riessman (2004a) suggests that a question such as ‘tell me what happened’, followed up with ‘and then what happened?’, is much more likely to provide a narrative account than ‘when did X happen?’ While some narrative researchers prefer simply to start people off by asking them to tell their story about an event, Riessman argues that it is usually necessary to keep asking follow-up questions to stimulate the flow of details and impressions. For example, in her study of divorce, she often asked ‘Can you remember a time when . . . ?’ and then followed it up with ‘What happened that makes you remember that particular moment in your marriage?’ There are, then, two distinct ways of thinking about narrative analysis: for some researchers it is an approach to analysing different kinds of data; for others, it is this, but, in addition, the researcher deliberately seeks to stimulate the telling of stories. The examples provided in Research in focus 24.5 and 24.6 are examples of the former; Research in focus 24.7 is an example of the purposeful elicitation of stories.



Research in focus 24.5 HIV narratives

Squire (2000) conducted narrative interviews with ‘thirty-four people infected or affected by HIV, who used HIV support groups for HIV positive people, and for workers, carers and volunteers in the HIV field’. Some were interviewed on more than one occasion. Interviewees were not directed to produce autobiographical narratives, but, in the course of the interviews, many did so. For example, interviewees who were HIV-positive produced narratives of how the identities that were forged immediately after diagnosis were derived from a stigmatizing identity. However, with time, they forged identities based on acceptance and also a shift from not being involved with others towards communion with others who were similarly affected by the disease. Other narratives

described by Squire include a *disengagement* narrative of seeking to get away from the illness and a *coming-out* narrative, which was one of finding ways of coming to terms with a gay sexual identity. With the latter, coming out about being HIV-positive inevitably meant for many gay men coming out about their sexuality to those who were not aware that they were gay. The dilemmas and concerns that this process occasioned, even though the concerns did not always have the negative impacts that were feared, was a key element in the coming-out narrative.



Research in focus 24.6

An example of organizational narratives in a hospital

Brown (1998) examined the competing narratives involved in the aftermath of the introduction of a hospital information support system (HISS) at a British hospital trust referred to as 'The City'. The information technology (IT) implementation was largely seen as unsuccessful because of the absence of clear clinical benefits and cost over-runs. Drawing on his unstructured and semi-structured interviews with key actors regarding the IT implementation and its aftermath, Brown presents three contrasting narratives: the ward narrative; the laboratory narrative; and the implementation team's narrative, thereby presenting the perspectives of the main groups of participants in the implementation.

The three contrasting narratives provide a very clear sense of the organization as a political arena in which groups and individuals contest the legitimacy of others' interpretations of events. Thus, 'the representations of each group's narrative are described as vehicles for establishing its altruistic motives for embarking on the project, and for attributing responsibility for what had come to be defined as a failing project to others' (Brown 1998: 49).

Thus, while the three groups had similar motivations for participating in the initiative, largely in terms of the espousal of an ethic of patient care, they had rather different latent motivations and interpretations of what went wrong. In terms of the former, whereas the ward narrative implied a latent motivation to save doctors' and nurses' time, the laboratory team emphasized the importance of retaining the existing IT systems, and the implementation team placed the accent on the possible advantages for their own careers, in large part by the increased level of dependence on their skills. In terms of the contrasting narratives of what went wrong, the ward narrative was to do with the failure of the implementation team to coordinate the initiative and meet deadlines, and the laboratory team emphasized the tendency for the implementation team not to listen or communicate. For their part, the implementation team's diagnosis was to do with the ward staff failing to communicate their needs, lack of cooperation from the laboratory staff, and poorly written software.



Research in focus 24.7

Narratives about the mantelpiece

Hurdley's (2006) interest in material culture led her to examine how people think about artefacts that are important to them. She interviewed thirty people and their families in Cardiff who had been identified in a postal questionnaire survey as likely to be appropriate research participants. Hurdley conducted her interviews in order to elicit narratives about the artefacts displayed on their mantelpieces. According to Hurdley (2006: 721): 'exploring the narratives about things emphasizes what mantelpiece displays (or other domestic display areas) are accomplishing in the home.'

Research participants were invited to tell stories about these items on display. These stories were usually contextualized by requesting interviewees to provide stories about their housing histories. Hurdley (2006: 721) writes:

Each object could . . . be made the subject of a narrative, as I asked individuals to tell me about the origins of the vase, or clock, or ornament. At other times, the information they had written in the questionnaires concerning childhood memories, or why they did not want a mantelpiece, suggested a narrative pathway. . . . Although the artefact on display remains materially the same, different stories, or different versions of the same story, can be related to it according to the specific identity its owner wishes to invoke in an interaction.

She goes on to show that the artefacts and the stories around them are a context within which not only identities can surface, but also identities that would not otherwise be obvious to the observer or possibly to the research participant.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue that a narrative should be viewed in terms of the functions that the narrative serves for the teller. The aim of narrative interviews is to elicit interviewees' reconstructed accounts of connections between events and between events and contexts (see Research in focus 24.5 for an example). A narrative analysis will then entail a seeking-out of the forms and functions of narrative. R. L. Miller (2000) proposes that narrative interviews in life story or biographical research are far more concerned with eliciting the interviewee's perspective as revealed in the telling of the story of his or her life or family than with the facts of that life. There is a concern with how that perspective changes in relation to different contexts. The interviewer is very much a part of the process in that he or she is fully implicated in the construction of the story for the interviewee. Research in focus 24.6 provides an example of the application of a narrative analysis approach to an environment that demonstrates its potential beyond the life story context. In this case, the author explores competing narratives in accounting for the failed implementation of an IT system in a British hospital.

Narrative analysis, then, is an approach to the analysis of qualitative data that emphasizes the stories that people employ to account for events. It can be applied to data that have been created through a variety of research methods (notably semi-structured and unstructured interviewing and participant observation), but it has also become a focus for an interviewing approach in its own right—that is, the narrative interview in which the researcher sets out to elicit stories. It would be wrong to view narrative analysis primarily in terms of qualitative interviewing in spite of the focus on it in the account presented here. Narrative analysis can be employed in relation to documents too and as such provides a potential strategy for analysing such sources in addition to those

covered in Chapter 23. For example, E. M. Davis (2008) conducted a narrative analysis of documents concerning breast cancer produced by the National Cancer Institute in the USA. E. M. Davis (2008: 68) employed six dimensions of narrative to analyse the discourse surrounding breast cancer in these documents: 'characters, setting, events, audience, causal relations, and themes'. She uncovered 'a robust narrative focused on an ideal of women who can be treated successfully and who can look forward to recovery from breast cancer. The narrative demonstrates a generally consistent set of underlying values and expectations' (E. M. Davis 2008: 68). She calls this an early cancer narrative, which comprises six elements that form a narrative plot:

1. *Presymptomatic*. The woman is diligent about checking herself.
2. *Symptomatic*. The woman responds quickly and in a medically appropriate way to the discovery of an abnormality.
3. *Diagnosis*. Tests are conducted, and, if cancer is diagnosed, the woman becomes a patient. A doctor will administer the appropriate treatment.
4. *Treatment*. The woman becomes informed about her treatment(s) and their side effects and communicates regularly about her condition and concerns with her doctor.
5. *Recovery*. The patient improves both physically and emotionally, while maintaining communication with her doctor.
6. *Post-recovery*. The patient returns to her previous life before the onset of cancer.

Underlying this narrative are two core themes: risk (all women are at risk of the disease) and control (medical treatments are crucial to the development of the disease).

In addition, Davis points to a contradiction within the narrative: on the one hand, it is a temporary nuisance; on the other hand, breast cancer is a lifelong issue for women.

As Riessman (2008) observes, narratives may relate to quite long periods of time (such as an entire life story or to an extended period of time, as in many illness narratives or in relation to an occupational career, as in Research in focus 20.8) or to a specific event. In relation to the latter, she gives the example of stories of acts of resistance, as provided somewhat unusually in answers to open questions employed in the course of a structured interview survey of 430 people in New Jersey concerning how 'they experience, interpret, and use law' (Ewick and Silbey 2003: 1338). One of the strategies of resistance identified was 'rule literalness', which refers to people using organizations' rules to their own ends in order to circumvent or bend those rules as a means of resistance. An example is that of Michael Chapin, who was arrested and fined \$500 for driving without insurance and was forced to pay in cash. It was later found that he had been arrested in error and the charges against him were dismissed. He refused to accept a cheque as a refund:

Then they try to write me a check for my money back and I wouldn't accept it. I made a big stink. I said I want my cash back. I gave you cash, I want cash back. . . . I said I don't care what you have to do. I don't care if you have to print the money up. I want cash money. You didn't trust me for a check and I don't trust you either. I made them open the safe. [The judge] came back to see what I was yelling at the clerk, telling her I want my money. (Ewick and Silbey 2003: 1353–4)

In this case, the story relates to a specific incident rather than something that occurs over an extended period of time. By contrast, the stories elicited in connection with the focus of Research in focus 24.5 relate to extended periods of time, as do the narratives that relate to E. M. Davis's (2008) document-based investigation.

As an approach to the analysis of qualitative data, narrative analysis has not gone uncriticized. Bury (2001), while noting the growing interest in *illness narratives* (stories that people tell about the causes of, in particular, chronic illnesses they and/or others experience and the impacts they have on their and others' lives), argues that there has been a tendency for narrative researchers to

treat the stories they are told uncritically. For example, he suggests that the frequent recourse in illness narratives to coping with and normalizing chronic illness may in large part be to do with an attempt to convince the audience (for example, an interviewer or the reader of a book about someone's struggle with illness) of competence. It may, therefore, have more to do with signalling that one is not a failure in a society in which failure is frowned upon. Thus a narrative of coping with adversity in the form of a chronic illness may have more to do with wanting to be seen as a fully functioning member of society than a realistic account of coming-to-terms with a medical condition. However, as Bury recognizes, the social conditions that prompt such narratives and the form that the narratives take are themselves revealing. In drawing attention to the motives that may lie behind illness narratives, he is seeking not to undermine narrative analysis but to draw attention to the issue of what it is that narratives are supposed to be revealing to the researcher. A similar point could possibly be raised in connection with the study of narrative in organizations referred to in Research in focus 24.6. What is it that such studies reveal? Clearly, they draw attention to competing understandings of what goes on in organizations, but one might query how far the narratives reflect an underlying 'truth' about what happens or how far they reflect the divergent perspectives of different groups. In a sense, it does not matter: it is the perception that is typically important to people, but it may prove significant to the researcher in terms of how the stories should be interpreted.

One further issue is that narrative analysis has increasingly splintered into a number of different approaches that nonetheless share certain common assumptions. For example, Phoenix, Smith, and Sparkes (2010) draw a distinction between analyses that focus on the content and structure of stories and those that emphasize how the stories are conveyed. The latter entails attending to such things as stories as performances or the rhetorical devices used to convey them. As Riessman (2008: 11) has observed: 'Narrative analysis refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form. As in all families, there is conflict and disagreement among those holding different perspectives.' The presence of different ways of practising narrative analysis does not represent a criticism of the approach, but it does suggest that, for students interested in applying it to their data, there is a good deal of groundwork that needs to be done in terms of sorting out what kind of narrative analysis they are conducting.



Student experience

The use of narrative interviews

Isabella Robbins adopted a narrative interview approach for her study of parents' decision-making in connection with vaccination of their children. She did this by encouraging them to tell stories about the vaccinations.

In order to capture what I considered to be complex decision-making routes for some people contemplating childhood vaccination, I employed qualitative in-depth interviews as my main methodological route. In these interviews mothers were invited to explain how they came to their decisions regarding childhood vaccination. They were encouraged to tell the story of their child's/children's vaccination/s, and I took opportunities to follow up their talk. This narrative approach was supplemented towards the end of the interviews by inviting the mothers to respond to a series of informal vignettes, designed to elicit material relevant to foreshadowed and emerging themes.



To read more about Isabella's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/



Secondary analysis of qualitative data

One final point to bear in mind is that this discussion of qualitative data analysis may have been presumed to be solely concerned with the analysis of data in which the analyst has played a part in collecting. However, in recent years, secondary analysis of qualitative data has become a growing focus of discussion and interest. While the secondary analysis of quantitative data has been on the research agenda for many years (see Chapter 14), similar use of qualitative data has only recently come to the fore. The general idea of secondary analysis was addressed in Key concept 14.1.

There is no obvious reason why qualitative data cannot be the focus of secondary analysis, though it is undoubtedly the case that such data do present certain problems that are not fully shared by quantitative data. The possible grounds for conducting a secondary analysis are more or less the same as those associated with quantitative data (see Chapter 14). In the context of qualitative data, it is possible that a secondary analysis will allow the researcher to mine data that were not examined by the primary investigators or that new interpretations may be possible (see Research in focus 24.8 for an example).

With such considerations in mind, Qualidata, an archival resource centre, was created in the UK in 1994. The centre is not a repository for qualitative data (unlike the Data Archive, which does house quantitative data);

instead, it is concerned with 'locating, assessing and documenting qualitative data and arranging their deposit in suitable public archive repositories' (Corti et al. 1995). It has a very useful website: www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/about/introduction.asp (accessed 8 November 2010).

Its online catalogue—Qualicat—can be searched at the following address: www.qualidata.essex.ac.uk/search/qualicat.asp (accessed 8 November 2010).

Qualidata acknowledges certain difficulties with the reuse of qualitative data, such as the difficulty of making settings and people anonymous and the ethical problems involved in such reuse associated with promises of confidentiality. Also, Hammersley (1997) has suggested that reuse of qualitative data may be hindered by the secondary analyst's lack of an insider's understanding of the social context within which the data were produced. This possible difficulty may hinder the interpretation of data but would seem to be more of a problem with ethnographic field notes than with interview transcripts. Such problems even seem to afflict researchers revisiting their own data many years after the original research had been carried out (Mauthner et al. 1998: 742). There are also distinctive ethical issues deriving from the fact that the

original researcher(s) may not have obtained the consent of research participants for the analysis of data by others. This is a particular problem with qualitative data in view of the fact that it invariably contains detailed accounts of contexts and people that can make it difficult to conceal the identities of institutions and individuals in the presentation of raw data (as opposed to publications in

which such concealment is usually feasible). Nonetheless, in spite of certain practical difficulties, secondary analysis offers rich opportunities, not least because the tendency for qualitative researchers to generate large and unwieldy sets of data means that much of the material remains underexplored.



Research in focus 24.8

A secondary analysis of qualitative data from the *Affluent Worker* study

Savage (2005) examined the field notes collected by researchers in the course of the *Affluent Worker* study in the 1960s (see, e.g., Goldthorpe et al. 1968). This was an important project that explored questions concerning social class and work in Great Britain in this period. The findings in the monographs that emerged from the study emphasized the quantitative data collected from the social survey, and little use was made of the qualitative data that were collected in the course of the interviews. These qualitative data were deposited with Qualidata. Savage re-examined some of the essentially qualitative field note data that were collected. Savage argues that, although a huge amount of qualitative data was generated through the *Affluent Worker* studies, very little of this part of the research made its way into publication. Instead the researchers focused on aspects of their data that could be quantified, so that 'a huge amount of evocative material was "left on the cutting room floor"' (Savage 2005: 932). Savage uses the field notes, which contain many verbatim quotations from respondent interviews, to argue that rereading the field notes with a contemporary understanding of issues of money, power, and status indicates that the respondents had different understandings of class from Goldthorpe et al. that the researchers did not pick up on, and this difference of understanding affected how the data were interpreted. Savage shows that many of the affluent workers struggled with the notion of 'class identity' and that the kinds of views that they held about class and related matters were not as different from other working-class groups as the authors' inferences about their survey data implied. His analysis also suggests greater continuity in individual identities between now and then than might have been expected. He shows how the interpretation of the data is affected by the researcher, in that the differences between his views of the data and those of the original researchers may in part be to do with different perspectives that are brought to bear on those data. This example of the secondary analysis of qualitative data indicates that new light can be shed on old data, but it also raises interesting methodological issues, in this case concerning how to disentangle inferences about change from the impact of looking at old data through new conceptual lenses.



Key points

- The collection of qualitative data frequently results in the accumulation of a large volume of information.
- Qualitative data analysis is not governed by codified rules in the same way as quantitative data analysis.
- There are different approaches to qualitative data analysis, of which grounded theory is probably the most prominent.

- Coding is a key process in most qualitative data analysis strategies, but it is sometimes accused of fragmenting and decontextualizing text.
- Narrative analysis is an approach that emphasizes the stories that people tell in the course of interviews and other interactions with the qualitative researcher and that has become a distinctive strategy in its own right for the analysis of qualitative data.
- Secondary analysis of qualitative data is becoming a more prominent activity than in the past.



Questions for review

- What is meant by suggesting that qualitative data are an 'attractive nuisance'?

General strategies of qualitative data analysis

- What are the main ingredients of analytic induction?
- What makes it a rigorous method?
- What are the main ingredients of grounded theory?
- What is the role of coding in grounded theory and what are the different types of coding?
- What is the role of memos in grounded theory?
- Charmaz (2000: 519) has written that theoretical sampling 'represents a defining property of grounded theory'. Why do you think she feels this to be the case?
- What are some of the main criticisms of grounded theory?

Basic operations in qualitative data analysis

- Is coding associated solely with grounded theory?
- What are the main steps in coding?
- To what extent does coding result in excessive fragmentation of data?

Thematic analysis

- How far is there a codified scheme for conducting thematic analysis?
- How does the Framework approach help with a thematic analysis?
- What are the chief ways of identifying themes in qualitative data?

Narrative analysis

- To what extent does narrative analysis provide an alternative to data fragmentation?
- How does the emphasis on stories in narrative analysis provide a distinctive approach to the analysis of qualitative data?
- Can narrative analysis be applied to all kinds of qualitative interview?
- What is a narrative interview and how far does it differ from other kinds of qualitative interview?

Secondary analysis of qualitative data

- How feasible is it for researchers to analyse qualitative data collected by another researcher?



Online Resource Centre

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

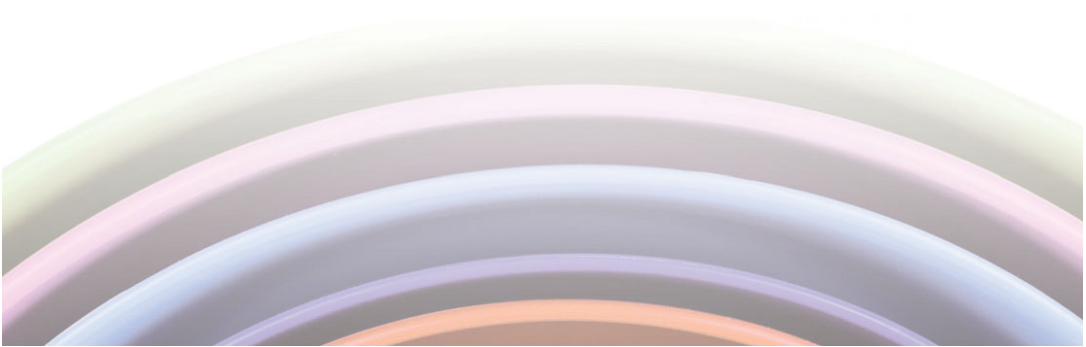
Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of qualitative data analysis. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.

25

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis: using NVivo

Chapter outline

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Chapter guide

One of the most significant developments in qualitative research since the early 1990s is the emergence of computer software that can assist in the analysis of qualitative data. This software is often referred to as computer-assisted (or computer-aided) qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). CAQDAS removes many if not most of the clerical tasks associated with the manual coding and retrieving of data. There is no industry leader among the different programs (in the sense that SPSS holds this position among quantitative data analysis software). This chapter introduces one of the main programs that has become popular among qualitative researchers—NVivo. This chapter explores:

- some of the debates about the desirability of CAQDAS;
- how to set up your research materials for analysis with NVivo;
- how to code using NVivo;
- how to retrieve coded text;
- how to create memos;
- basic computer operations in NVivo.

Introduction

One of the most notable developments in qualitative research in recent years has been the arrival of computer software that facilitates the analysis of qualitative data. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis, or CAQDAS as it is conventionally abbreviated, has been a growth area in terms of both the proliferation of programs that perform such analysis and the numbers of people using them. The term and its abbreviation were coined by Lee and Fielding (1991).

Most of the best-known programs are variations on the code-and-retrieve theme. This means that they allow the analyst to code text while working at the computer and to retrieve the coded text. Thus, if we code a large number of interviews, we can retrieve all those sequences of text to which a code (or combination of codes) was attached. This means that the computer takes over manual tasks

associated with the coding process referred to in the previous chapter. Typically, the analyst would:

- go through a set of data marking sequences of text in terms of codes (coding); and
- for each code, collect together all sequences of text coded in a particular way (retrieving).

The computer takes over the physical task of writing marginal codes, making photocopies of transcripts or field notes, cutting out all chunks of text relating to a code, and pasting them together. CAQDAS does not automatically do these things: the analyst must still interpret his or her data, code, and then retrieve the data, but the computer takes over the manual labour involved (wielding scissors and pasting small pieces of paper together, for example).



Is CAQDAS like quantitative data analysis software?

One of the comments often made about CAQDAS is that it does not and cannot help with decisions about the coding of textual materials or about the interpretation of findings (Sprokkereef et al. 1995; Weitzman and Miles 1995). However, this situation is little different (if at all)

from quantitative data analysis software. In quantitative research, the investigator sets out the crucial concepts and ideas in advance rather than generating them out of his or her data. Also, it would be wrong to represent the use of quantitative data analysis software like SPSS

as purely mechanical: once the analyses have been performed, it is still necessary to interpret them. Indeed, the choice of variables to be analysed and the techniques of analysis to be employed are themselves areas in which a considerable amount of interpretative expertise is required. Creativity is required by both forms of software.

CAQDAS differs from the use of quantitative data analysis software largely in terms of the environment within which it operates.

No industry leader

With quantitative data analysis, SPSS is both widely known and widely used. It is not the only statistical software used by social researchers, but it is certainly dominant. It has competitors, such as Minitab, but SPSS is close to being the industry leader. No parallel situation exists with regard to CAQDAS. Up until the early 1990s, The Ethnograph was probably the best-known and most widely used CAQDAS. Lee and Fielding (1991: 11) report that, between March 1988 and January 1990, 1,600 copies of the software were sold. However, at that time more and more programs were coming onto the market: ten other programs were referred to in an appendix to the book in which Lee and Fielding's (1991) article appeared, and since then further programs have appeared. Seven years later, the situation had changed. The same authors observed that, in the UK, The Ethnograph 'seems . . . to have lost ground to both NUD*IST and Atlas/ti over the last few years. NUD*IST is now probably the package that most people at least know by name' (Fielding and Lee 1998: 15).

NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing) became very popular in the 1990s and has been built upon more recently with the emergence of QSR NUD*IST Vivo, known as **NVivo**. This software is the one featured in this chapter. If you are unsure about which software is likely to meet your needs, I would recommend looking at the Qualitative Innovations in CAQDAS website at the University of Surrey and in particular:

<http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk/Support/Choosingsoftware/softwareoptions.html>
(accessed 7 December 2010)

which provides information about the main alternatives.

Lack of universal agreement about the utility of CAQDAS

Unlike quantitative data analysis, in which the use of computer software is both widely accepted and to all

intentions and purposes a necessity, among qualitative data analysts its use is by no means universally embraced. There are several concerns.

- Some writers are concerned that the ease with which coded text can be quantified, either within qualitative data analysis packages or by importing coded information into quantitative data analysis packages like SPSS, will mean that the temptation to quantify findings will prove irresistible to many researchers. As a result, there is a concern that qualitative research will then be colonized by the reliability and validity criteria of quantitative research (Hesse-Biber 1995).
- It has been suggested that CAQDAS reinforces and even exaggerates the tendency for the code-and-retrieve process that underpins most approaches to qualitative data analysis to result in a fragmentation of the textual materials on which researchers work (Weaver and Atkinson 1994). As a result, the narrative flow of interview transcripts and events recorded in field notes may be lost.
- It has also been suggested that the fragmentation process of coding text into chunks that are then retrieved and put together into groups of related fragments risks decontextualizing data (Buston 1997; Fielding and Lee 1998: 74). Having an awareness of context is crucial to many qualitative researchers, and the prospect of this element being sidelined is not an attractive prospect.
- Catterall and Maclaran (1997) have argued on the basis of their experience that CAQDAS is not very suitable for focus group data because the code and retrieve function tends to result in a loss of the communication process that goes on when this method is used. Many writers view the interaction that occurs in focus groups as an important feature of the method (Kitzinger 1994).
- Stanley and Temple (1995) have suggested that most of the coding and retrieval features that someone is likely to need in the course of conducting qualitative data analysis are achievable through powerful word-processing software. They show how this can be accomplished using Word for Windows. The key point here is that the advantage of using such software is that it does not require a lengthy period of getting acquainted with the mechanics of its operations. Also, of course, if someone already has the necessary word-processing software, the possible cost of a CAQDAS program is rendered unnecessary.
- Researchers working in teams may experience difficulties in coordinating the coding of text when different

people are involved in this activity (Sprokkereef et al. 1995).

- Coffey et al. (1994) have argued that the style of qualitative data analysis enshrined in most CAQDAS software is resulting in the emergence of a new orthodoxy. This arises because these programs presume and are predicated on a certain style of analysis—one based on coding and retrieving text—that owes a great deal to grounded theory. Coffey et al. argue that the emergence of a new orthodoxy is inconsistent with the growing flirtation with a variety of representational modes in qualitative research.
- Some forms of qualitative data analysis are not deemed suitable for CAQDAS. Potter and Hepburn (2012), for example, observe that it is rarely used in connection with discourse analysis, largely because the close attention required to the language used is not amenable to the code-and-retrieve functions that dominate most of the software packages.

On the other hand, several writers extol the virtues of such packages on a variety of grounds.

- Most obviously, CAQDAS can make the coding and retrieval process faster and more efficient.
- It has been suggested that new opportunities are offered. For example, Mangabeira (1995) has argued on the basis of her experience with The Ethnograph that her ability to relate her coded text to what are often referred to as ‘face-sheet variables’ (socio-demographic and personal information, such as age, title of job, number of years in school education) offered new opportunities in the process of analysing her data. Thus, CAQDAS may be helpful in the development of explanations.
- It is sometimes suggested that CAQDAS enhances the transparency of the process of conducting qualitative data analysis. It is often noted that the ways in which qualitative data are analysed are unclear in reports of findings (Bryman and Burgess 1994b). CAQDAS may force researchers to be more explicit and reflective about the process of analysis.

- CAQDAS software, like NVivo, invites the analyst to think about codes that are developed in terms of ‘trees’ of interrelated ideas. This can be a useful feature, in that it urges the analyst to consider possible connections between codes.

- Writers like Silverman (1985) have commented on the tendency towards anecdotalism in much qualitative research—that is, the tendency to use quotations from interview transcripts or field notes but with little sense of the prevalence of the phenomenon they are supposed to exemplify. CAQDAS invariably offers the opportunity to count such things as the frequency with which a form of behaviour occurred or a viewpoint was expressed in interviews. However, as previously noted, some qualitative researchers perceive risks in the opportunity offered for quantification of findings.

To use or not to use CAQDAS? If you have a very small data set, it may not be worth the time and trouble navigating your way around new software. On the other hand, if you think you may use it on a future occasion, taking the time and trouble may be worthwhile. If you do not have easy access to CAQDAS, it is likely to be too expensive for your personal purchase, though most universities have site licences for at least one of the programs. It is also worth bearing in mind that learning new software does provide you with useful skills that may be transferable on a future occasion. By and large, I feel it is worthwhile, but you need to bear in mind some of the factors mentioned above in deciding whether to use it. It is also striking that the bulk of the references used above are pre-2000 (see also the discussion of CAQDAS debates at: http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/Intro_CAQDAS/software_debates.php (accessed 7 January 2011).

In large part, this is because CAQDAS has become more accepted and because the main parameters of the debate have not changed significantly.

The rest of this chapter provides an introduction to NVivo. It is based on my study of visitors to Disney theme parks, where I used NVivo as a tool to assist me in the process of qualitative data analysis.



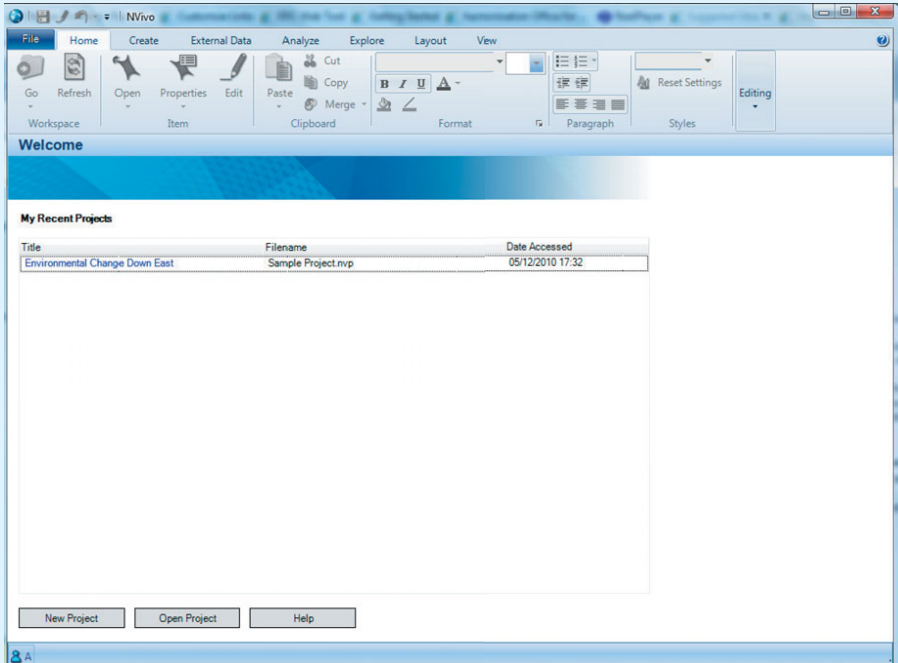
Learning NVivo

This exposition of NVivo and its functions addresses just its most basic features. There may be features not

covered here that you would find useful in your own work, so try to explore it. There is a very good help

Plate 25.1

The opening screen



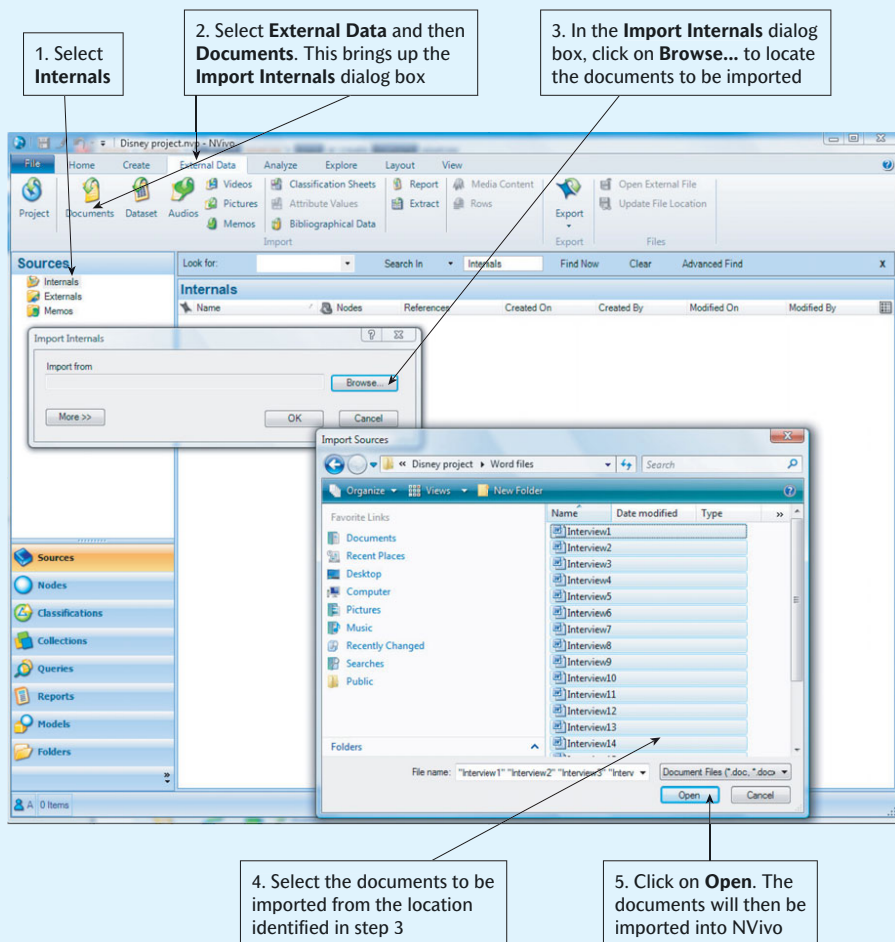
facility and tutorials have been included to assist learners. In the following account, as in Chapter 16, → signifies ‘click once with the left-hand button of your mouse’—that is, select.

On opening NVivo, you will be presented with a welcome screen (Plate 25.1). This screen shows any existing NVivo projects and is the springboard for either opening one of the existing projects or starting a new one. If you are starting a new project, as in the example that follows, → **File** → **New Project**. The **New Project** dialog box appears and you are asked to provide a **Title** for your project. For this exercise, the title ‘Disney Project1’ was chosen. You are also asked to give a **Description** of the project, though this is an optional feature. When you have done this, → **OK**.

You then need to import the documents you want to code. In this case, they will be interview transcripts from the project on visitors to Disney theme parks, referred to in Chapter 24. Other kinds of documents can be imported such as fieldwork notes. NVivo 9 can accept documents in both rich text (.rtf) and Word (.doc, .docx) formats. To import the documents, → **Internals** (below **Sources** at the top of the **Navigation view**) → **External Data** on the **Ribbon** → **Document** button on the **Find bar** [opens the **Import Internals** dialog box] → **Browse** to locate the documents that are to be imported → the documents to be imported (you can hold down the **Ctrl** key to select several documents or if you want to select all of them hold down the **Ctrl** key and tap the **A** key) → **Open** (see Plate 25.2 for the series of steps). The

Plate 25.2

Stages in importing documents into NVivo



documents will then be visible in the Document Viewer. Once the documents have been imported, they can be read and edited. All you need to do is to double-click on the yellow icon to the left of each interview in the List view.

Coding

Coding your data is obviously one of the key phases in the whole process of qualitative data analysis. For NVivo, coding is accomplished through nodes (see Key Concept 25.1).



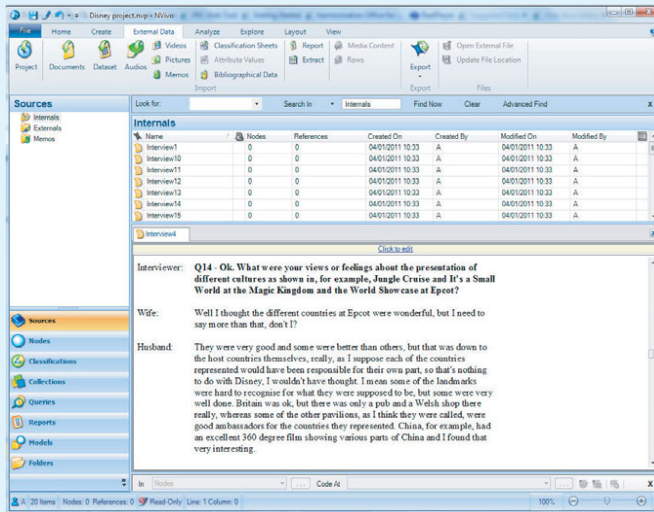
Key concept 25.1

What is a node?

NVivo's help system in earlier releases defined coding as 'the process of marking passages of text in a project's documents with *nodes*' (emphasis added). Nodes are, therefore, the route by which coding is undertaken. In turn, a node is defined in the latest release as 'a collection of references about a specific theme, place, person or other area of interest'. When a document has been coded, the node will incorporate references to those portions of documents in which the code appears. Once established, nodes can be changed or deleted.

Plate 25.3

The document viewer and its components



Ribbon—contains the main NVivo commands. The Find bar changes when you select a different command

Find bar—to search for items in your NVivo project

List view—displays the contents of your folders

Detail view—here you can examine contents of your documents, nodes, etc.

Quick coding bar

Navigation view—provides access to documents, nodes, etc.

There are several ways of going about the coding process in NVivo. The approach I took in relation to the coding of the Disney Project was to follow these steps.

- I read through the interviews both in printed form and in the Document viewer (Plate 25.3). The viewer is treated as having a number of different components or sections and these are highlighted in Plate 25.3.
- I worked out some codes that seemed relevant to the documents.
- I went back into the documents and coded them using NVivo.

An alternative strategy is to code while browsing the documents.

Creating nodes

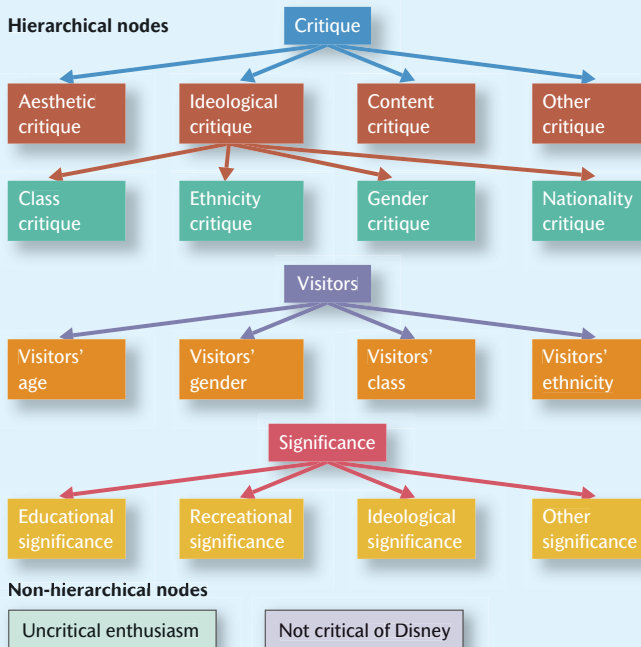
The nodes that I used that were relevant to the passage in Tips and skills 'Coded text from the Disney project' in

Chapter 24 are presented in Figure 25.1. Prior to NVivo 9, when creating a node, the researcher chose between creating a free node or a tree node. The latter is a node that is organized in a hierarchy of connected nodes, whereas free nodes were not organized in this way. This distinction has been dropped in NVivo 9, and the software assumes that a tree node is being created. Two points are crucial to note here for users of earlier releases of the software. First, the tendency now is not to refer to 'tree nodes' but to treat them as hierarchically organized nodes. Second, free nodes (that is, nodes that are not hierarchically organized) can still be created—they are simply nodes without 'children' to use the latest NVivo terminology.

Notice that there are three groups of *hierarchically organized nodes* and two *non-hierarchically organized nodes* in Figure 25.1. The nodes can be created in the following way.

Figure 25.1

Nodes used in the Disney project



Creating a non-hierarchically organized node

This sequence of steps demonstrates how to create the non-hierarchically organized node *not critical of Disney*.

1. While in the **Document Viewer** [this is the term used to describe the general screen shown in Plate 25.3] → **Create** in the Ribbon
2. → **Node** in the **Find bar** [opens the **New Node** dialog box—see Plate 25.4]

3. Enter the node **Name** [not critical of Disney] and a **Description** (the latter is optional)

4. → **OK**

Creating hierarchically organized nodes

To create a hierarchically organized node, the initial process is exactly the same as with a non-hierarchically organized node. In the following example, I will explain

Plate 25.4

Stages in creating a non-hierarchically organized node

1. Select Create

2. Select Node

3. In the **New Node** dialog box, enter the node **Name** and a **Description** (latter is optional)

4. Click on **OK**

how to create the hierarchically organized node *Class critique*, which is a child of the hierarchically organized node *Ideological critique*, which is itself a child of the hierarchically organized node *Critique* (see Figure 25.1). The following steps will generate this node.

1. While in the **Document Viewer** → **Create** in the Ribbon
2. → **Node** in the **Find bar** [opens the **New Node** dialog box—see Plate 25.5]

Plate 25.5

Stages in creating a hierarchically organized node

1. Click on **Create**

2. Click on **Node**

3. If the node is a child of an existing node, make sure that the appropriate node has been selected

4. In the **New Node** dialog box enter the node **Name** and a **Description** (latter is optional)

Hint. Ensure that the correct sequence of children has been selected here

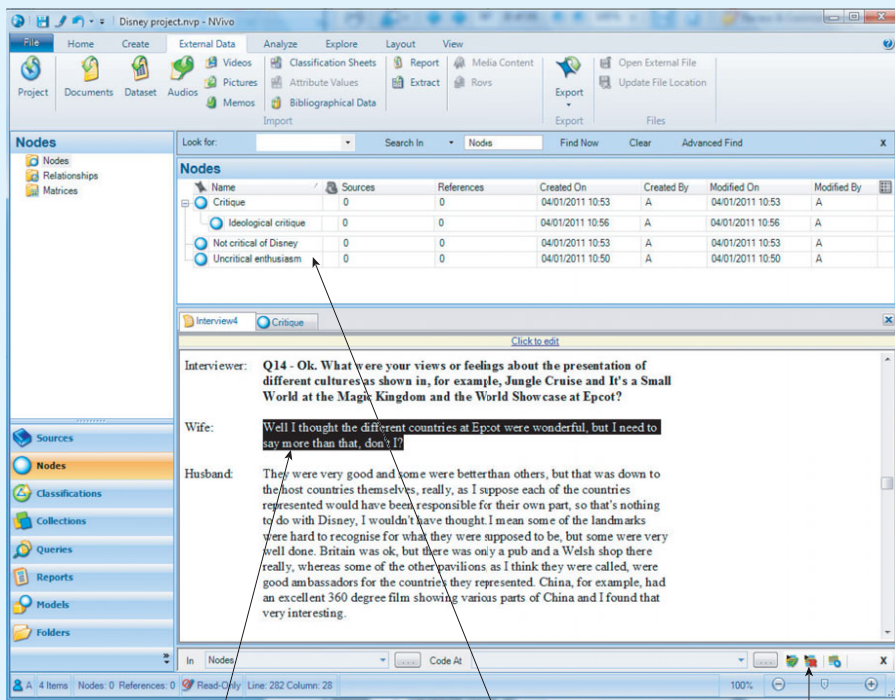
5. Click on **OK**

The screenshot shows the NVivo interface with the 'New Node' dialog box open. The 'Nodes' list on the left shows a hierarchy: Critique -> Ideological critique -> Nationality crit. The 'New Node' dialog box is open, showing the 'General' tab with fields for Name, Description, Nickname, and Hierarchical name. The 'Hierarchical name' field is populated with 'Nodes\\Critique\\Ideological critique\\Class critique'. The 'OK' button is highlighted.

3. Enter the node Name [*critique*] and a Description (the latter is optional)
4. → OK
5. → *Critique* in the list of nodes in the List viewer
6. → Node in the Find bar [opens the New Node dialog box—see Plate 25.5]
7. Enter the node Name [*Ideological critique*] and a Description (the latter is optional). This node will form a child of the hierarchically organized node [make sure that in Hierarchical name it reads
8. → *Ideological critique* in the list of nodes in the List viewer
9. → Node in the Find bar [opens the New Node dialog box—see Plate 25.5]
10. Enter the node Name [*Class critique*] and a Description (the latter is optional). This node will form a child of the hierarchically organized node [make sure that in Hierarchical name it reads

Plate 25.6

Using drag and drop to code



Highlight text to be coded and holding down the left-hand button of the mouse ...

... drop into the appropriate node, in this case *uncritical enthusiasm*

Hint. To uncode at any time, highlight the text to be uncode and click on this button. This will clear the coding at that point

Nodes\\Critique\\Ideological critique, as this will mean it is a child of **Ideological critique**, which is itself a child of **Critique**]. See Plate 25.5.

11. → OK

Applying nodes in the coding process

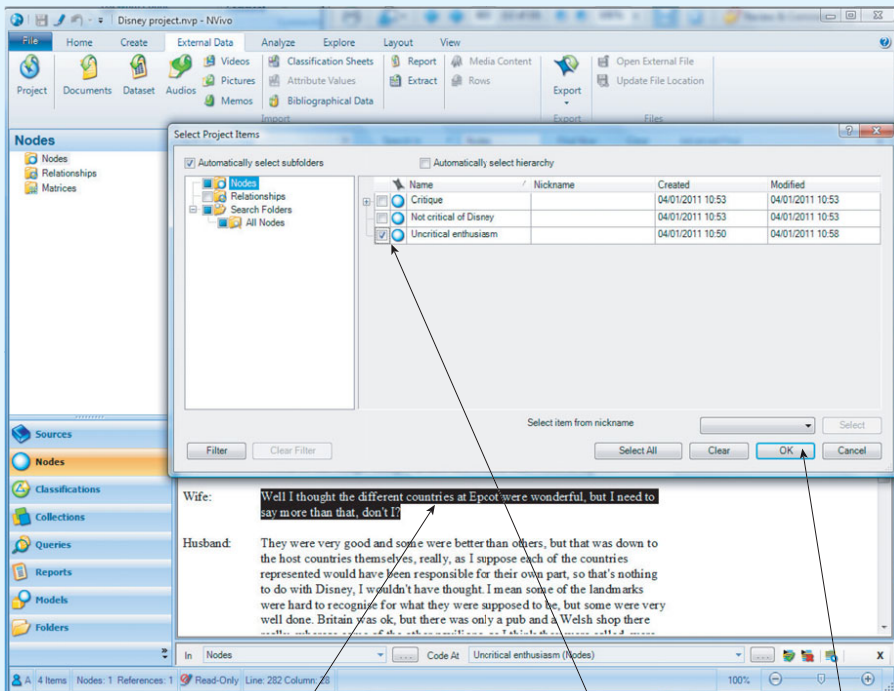
Coding is carried out by applying nodes to segments of text. Once you have set up some nodes (and do remember you can add and alter them at any time), assuming that you are looking at a document in the viewer, you can highlight the area of the document that you want to code

and then right-click on the mouse while holding the cursor over the highlighted text. If the node that you want to use has not been created yet, highlight the text you want to code, right-click on the highlighted text, and then → **Code Selection** → **Code Selection at New Node...** This opens the **New Node** dialog box. You can then create a new node in the manner outlined in the previous sections.

If the code you want to use has been created, one of the easiest ways of coding in NVivo 9 is to drag and drop text into an existing code (see Plate 25.6). To do this, highlight the text to be coded and then, holding down

Plate 25.7

Coding in NVivo



1. Highlight the text to be coded, right click and from the menu, select **Code Selection** and then select **Code Selection at Existing Nodes**. This brings up the **Select Project Items** dialog box

2. Select the appropriate node by clicking on the box to the left of the node

3. Click on **OK**

the left-hand button, drag the text over to the appropriate node in the **List view**.

Another way is to highlight the text you want to code, right-click over the highlighted text, → **Code Selection** → **Code Selection at Existing Nodes**, which opens the **Select Project Items** dialog box (see Plate 25.7). Tick the node(s) you want to use. Thus, in the example in Plate 25.7, the tick by *Uncritical enthusiasm* will code the highlighted text at that node. If you also wanted to use a hierarchically organized node, you would need to find the appropriate parent in the list of nodes within the List view and then click on the plus to the left of it. To *uncode* at any point, simply highlight the passage to be uncoded, and → the button with a red cross in it  in

the Quick coding bar (see Plate 25.3). Alternatively, you can right-click on the highlighted text and → **Uncode**.

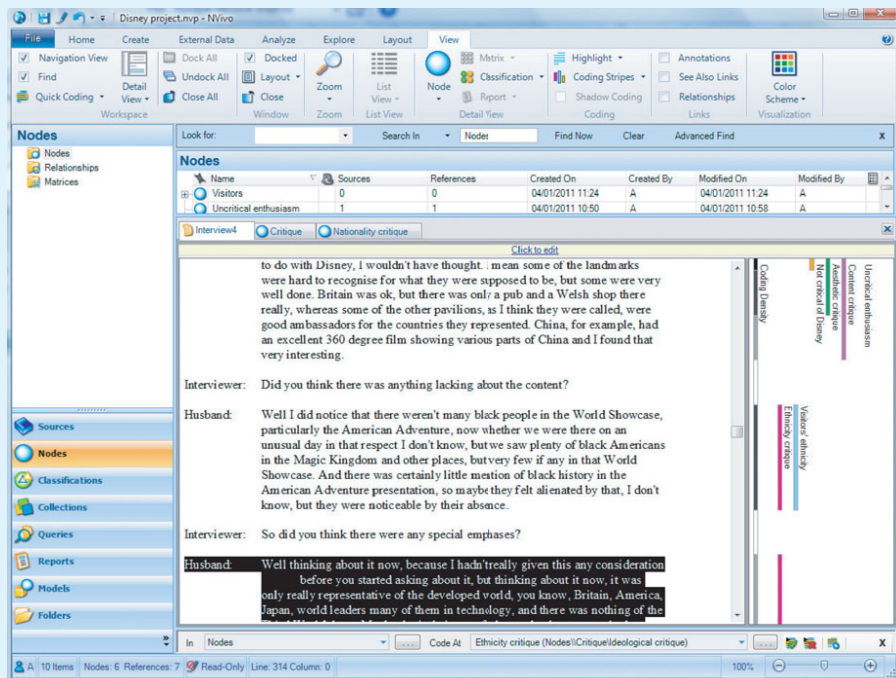
Coding stripes

It is very helpful to be able to see the areas of text that have been coded and the nodes applied to them. NVivo has a very useful aid to this called *coding stripes*. Selecting this facility allows you to see multi-coloured stripes that represent portions of coded text and the nodes that have been used. Overlapping codes do not represent a problem at all.

To activate this facility, → **View** in the **Ribbon** and then → **Coding Stripes** in the **Find bar** → **Show Nodes Recently Coding**. Plate 25.8 shows these stripes. We can

Plate 25.8

Coding stripes



The screenshot shows the NVivo software interface with the 'View' ribbon selected. The 'Coding Stripes' option is active in the 'Find' bar. The main text area displays interview transcripts with colored stripes indicating coded segments. The stripes are labeled with node names: 'Uncritical enthusiasm', 'Content critique', 'Academic critique', 'Not critical of Disney', 'Vigilant ethnicity', and 'Ethnicity critique'. The interface includes a ribbon at the top with tabs like File, Home, Create, External Data, Analyze, Explore, Layout, and View. The left sidebar shows a tree view of nodes, sources, and collections. The bottom status bar shows 'A, 10 items', 'Nodes: 6', 'References: 7', 'Read-Only', 'Line: 314', 'Column: 0', and a zoom level of 100%.

see that some segments have been coded at two or more nodes—such as *visitors ethnicity* and *ethnicity critique*. All the nodes that have been used are clearly displayed.

Searching text

Once you have coded your data, however preliminary that may be, you will want to conduct searches of your data at some point. A typical instance is that you are likely to want to retrieve all occurrences in your documents of a particular node. NVivo allows you very rapidly

to trawl through all your documents so that you will end up with all text that was coded at a particular node in all your documents. This is very easy to do in NVivo 9.

To search for occurrences of a single node

These steps describe how to conduct a search for sequences of text that have been coded in terms of the node *ethnicity critique*. The stages are outlined in Plate 25.9.

1. While in the **Document Viewer** → **Nodes** in the **Navigation view**. This will bring up your list of nodes in the **List view**.

Plate 25.9

Stages in retrieving text from a node

The screenshot shows the NVivo 9 interface with the 'Nodes' list on the left and the 'Nodes' table in the center. The 'Nodes' list on the left has 'Nodes' selected. The 'Nodes' table in the center lists various nodes and their associated data. The 'Nodes' table has columns: Name, Sources, References, Created On, Created By, Modified On, and Modified By. The 'Nodes' table lists the following nodes:

Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Visitors	0	0	04/01/2011 11:24	A	04/01/2011 11:24	A
Uncritical enthusiasm	1	1	04/01/2011 10:50	A	04/01/2011 10:58	A
Not critical of Disney	1	1	04/01/2011 10:53	A	04/01/2011 11:21	A
Critique	0	0	04/01/2011 10:53	A	04/01/2011 10:53	A
Ideological critique	0	0	04/01/2011 10:56	A	04/01/2011 10:56	A
Nationality critique	0	0	04/01/2011 11:25	A	04/01/2011 11:47	A
Ethnicity critique	1	2	04/01/2011 11:23	A	04/01/2011 11:46	A

The 'Nodes' table is shown with the 'Nodes' tab selected. The 'Nodes' table lists the following nodes:

Reference 1 - 1.72% Coverage

Husband: Well I did notice that there weren't many black people in the World Showcase, particularly the American Adventure, now whether we were there on an unusual day in that respect I don't know, but we saw plenty of black Americans in the Magic Kingdom and other places, but very few if any in that World Showcase. And there was certainly little mention of black history in the American Adventure presentation, so maybe they felt alienated by that, I don't know, but they were noticeably by their absence.

Reference 2 - 1.64% Coverage

Well thinking about it now, because I hadn't really given this any consideration before you started asking about it, but thinking about it now, it was only really representative of the developed world, you know, Britain, America, Japan, world leaders many of them in technology, and there was nothing of the Third World there. Maybe that's their own fault, maybe they were asked to participate and didn't, but now that I think about it, that does come to me.

1. Click on **Nodes**

2. Locate the node to be analysed and double click on it

Plate 25.10

The Coding Query dialog box (searching for the intersection of two nodes)

2. Select **Explore**

3. Select **New Query** and then **Coding...** from the menu of options. This brings up the **Coding Query** dialog box

4. Select the **Coding Criteria** tab

5. Select the **Advanced** tab

1. Click on **Queries**

6. Select **Coded at**

10. Click on **Run**

7. Click on **Select**

8. Choose the nodes to be analysed and click on **Add to List**. They will appear here

9. Ensure **AND** has been selected

2. If you cannot find the parents of *Ethnicity critique* → on the little box with a + sign to the left of *Critique* [this brings up a list of all branches of the node *Critique*].
4. → on the + to the left of *Ideological critique* [this brings up a list of all branches of the node *Ideological critique*].
5. Double-click on *Ethnicity critique*.
6. All instances of coded text at the node *Ethnicity critique* will appear at the bottom of the screen, as in Plate 25.9.
3. → **New Query** on the **Find** bar and select **Coding...** from the menu of options [opens the **Coding Query** dialog box in Plate 25.10]
4. → **Coding Criteria** tab
5. → **Advanced** tab
6. In the **Define more criteria:** panel, → **Coded at** from the drop-down menu
7. → **Select**. You then need to choose the two nodes to be analysed
8. → Once the nodes have been selected, → **Add to List**
9. Make sure **AND** has been selected immediately below **Define more criteria:**
10. → **Run**

To search for the intersection of two nodes

This section is concerned with searching for sequences of text that have been coded at two nodes: *aesthetic critique* and *not critical of Disney*. This type of search is known as a 'Boolean search'. It will locate text coded in terms of the two nodes together (that is, where they intersect), *not* text coded in terms of each of the two nodes. The following steps need to be followed:

1. In the **Document Viewer**, → **Queries** in the **Navigation view**
2. → the **Explore** tab in the **Ribbon**

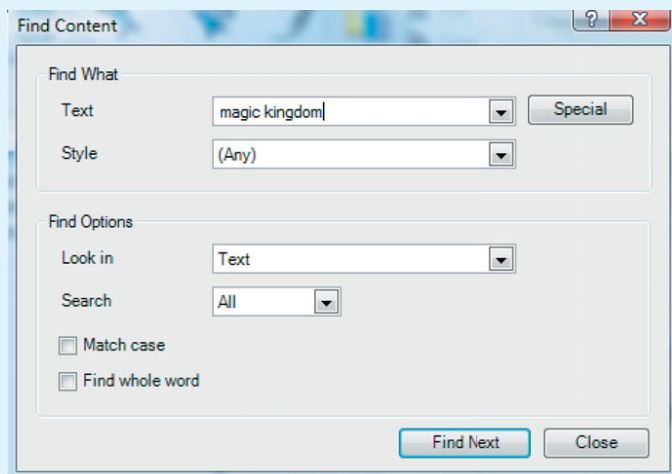
To search for specific text

NVivo can also perform searches for specific words or phrases, often referred to as 'strings' in computer jargon. For example, to search for *Magic Kingdom*, the following steps would need to be taken:

1. → **Home** on the **Ribbon**
2. → **Find...** [opens the **Find Content** dialog box in Plate 25.11]

Plate 25.11

The Find Content dialog box



3. Insert **Magic Kingdom** to the right of **Text**
4. To the right of **Look in**, make sure **Text** has been selected
5. → **Find Next**

Text searching can be useful for the identification of possible in vivo codes. You would then need to go back to

the documents to create nodes to allow you to code in terms of any in vivo codes.

Output

To find the results of coding at a particular node, → the **Nodes** button in the bottom left. This will bring up your node structure. Find the node that you are interested in

Plate 25.12

Stages in creating a memo

2. Select **Memos**

3. Select **Create**

4. Select **Memo**. This brings up the **New Memo** dialog box

1. Select **Sources**

5. Enter the memo **Name** and **Description** here

6. Click on **OK**

The screenshot shows the NVivo software interface. The 'Sources' pane on the left has 'Sources' selected. The 'Create' button is highlighted in the ribbon. The 'Memo' button is also highlighted. The 'New Memo' dialog box is open, showing the 'General' tab. The 'Name' field contains 'Gender critique' and the 'Description' field contains a paragraph of text. The 'Location' is set to 'Memos'. The 'Size' is 0 KB and the 'Color' is set to 'None'. The 'OK' button is highlighted.

and simply double-click on that node. This will bring up all text coded at that node along with information about which interview(s) the text comes from.

Memos

In Chapter 24 it was noted that one feature of the grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis is the use of memos in which ideas and illustrations might be stored. Memos can be easily created in NVivo. The following steps, which are outlined in Plate 25.12, should be followed:

1. In the **Navigation View**, → **Sources**
2. Under Sources → **Memos**
3. → **Create** tab on the **Find bar** and then
4. → **Memo** [opens the **New Memo** dialog box shown in Plate 25.12]
5. To the right of **Name**, type in a name for the memo (e.g. **gender critique**). You can also provide a brief description of the document in the window to the right of **Description**, as in Plate 25.12
6. → **OK**

Saving an NVivo project

When you have finished working on your data, you will need to save it for future use. To do this, on the menu bar at the top, → **File** → **Save**. This will save all the work you have done. You will then be given the opportunity to exit NVivo or to create or open a project without worrying about losing all your hard work. You might also consider backing up the project.

Opening an existing NVivo project

To retrieve a project you have created, at the Welcome screen, → **File** → **Open**. This opens the **Open Project** dialog box. Search for and then select the project you want to work on. Then → **Open**. Alternatively, simply click on the project you want to retrieve on the opening screen.

You can also open a NUD*IST project, or one designed using an earlier release of NVivo, by selecting the appropriate project type from the drop-down menu to the right of **File name**..



Student experience

The advantages of CAQDAS

Rebecca Barnes found NVivo extremely helpful in the context of analysing data from her semi-structured interviews concerning violence and abuse in same-sex partnerships. She began to use a thematic analysis of the transcripts to identify 'similarities and differences between different participants' accounts' and then decided to use NVivo. Although she found it time-consuming, it made many of the tasks associated with qualitative data analysis easier:

I then used a computer software package for qualitative analysis called NVivo. This involved a process of indexing all the transcripts, in order to group together all the pieces of data that corresponded to a certain category or theme; for example, emotional abuse. Within the category of emotional abuse, there was then a more detailed breakdown of the types of emotional abuse, such as verbal abuse, or possessiveness. Like the transcribing, this was another time-consuming task, but, again, it offered huge rewards by increasing my familiarity with my data, and encouraging me to think analytically when naming and grouping codes. Although using NVivo required me to learn to use a new software package and to spend a substantial amount of time on the coding, it has saved me considerable time in the long term, as if I want to view all the data about a specific topic, such as verbal abuse, then rather than having to trawl back through forty transcripts, it only takes a few small mouse clicks! Once I had reached this stage, I started to make more concrete links between different themes, and I drew upon existing literature to examine the extent to which my findings supported or contradicted what is already known about both woman-to-woman partner abuse and heterosexual women's experiences of partner abuse.



To read more about Rebecca's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Final thoughts

As with the chapter on SPSS (Chapter 16), a short chapter like this can provide help only with the most basic features of the software. In so doing, I hope that it will have given students who may be uncertain about whether CAQDAS is for them an impression of what the software is like. Doubtless, some readers will decide it is not for them and that the tried-and-tested scissors and

paste will do the trick. On the other hand, the software warrants serious consideration because of its power and flexibility.

Some useful online help in the use of NVivo can be found at the Online QDA website and the CAQDAS Networking Project website at:

<http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/> (accessed 7 January 2011)

<http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk/> (accessed 7 January 2011)



Student experience Reservations about CAQDAS

Gareth Matthews did not use CAQDAS because of problems of access to the software while in the field conducting his interviews. He describes his approach as follows:

I started organizing my transcribed data into a spreadsheet, so as to feed my early results back into the interview schedule. As I continued to do this, I refined my 'codes' under different headings on the spreadsheet, and became very familiar with the content of the interviews. I think that, in reality, the process of conducting interviews, transcribing interviews, and then arranging the data under different headings results in the findings being lodged in the brain of the researcher.

However, he writes that he would advocate using a package because of the 'laboriousness' of the approach he took. He also feels that there are clear advantages to his approach, because CAQDAS

carries the danger of the researcher becoming detached from the findings, and missing some of the less immediately obvious themes that come out of interviews (such as contradictions within the account of a respondent). By reading and rereading my interviews countless times, I was forced to become familiar with the technical content and more tacit meanings within the data set, and I feel that this helped me to find themes, as well as to refine my research instruments as I went along.



To read more about Gareth's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/



Key points

- CAQDAS does not and cannot help with decisions about how to code qualitative data or how to interpret findings.
- CAQDAS can make many if not most of the clerical tasks associated with the manual coding and retrieving of data easier and faster.
- If you have a very small data set, it is probably not worth the time and trouble navigating your way around a new software program.
- If you have a larger data set, or are intending to use the software skills that you acquire on other research projects in the future, CAQDAS can be an invaluable tool.



Questions for review

Is CAQDAS like quantitative data analysis software?

- What are the main points of difference between CAQDAS and quantitative data analysis software like SPSS?
- Why is CAQDAS controversial?
- To what extent does CAQDAS help with qualitative data analysis?

Learning NVivo

- What is a node?
- What is the difference between a hierarchically organized node and a node that has not been hierarchically organized?
- What is in vivo coding?
- Do nodes have to be set up in advance?
- In NVivo, what is the difference between a document and a memo?
- How do you go about searching for a single node and the intersection of two nodes?
- Why might it be useful to display coding stripes?
- How do you search for specific text?



Online Resource Centre

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.
